

# **IN THE PURSUIT OF LIGHT**

Voices of Educational Activists in Afghanistan

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for  
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education  
in the University of Canterbury  
by Mohammad Tariq Habibyar  
Christchurch, New Zealand  
2016

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I dedicate this thesis to my mother Aabeda Khaliqi and my father Sarajuddin Habibyar who are the Noor (light) of my eyes and the strength of my heart and soul. They made great sacrifices to educate me in the midst of war in Afghanistan. I am wholeheartedly grateful for their unconditional love and care.

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## **Acknowledgement**

I owe many people a debt of gratitude for the success of this work. Throughout this study, I was greatly privileged to work under the supervision of Professors Letitia Fickel and Janinka Greenwood. I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to both of them. I found Professor Fickel a great thinker and a woman with great heart and soul. Similarly, the patience, wisdom, dedication, and humility of Professor Greenwood touched my life in this journey. I owe a huge debt to both of these wonderful and kind human beings. I am indebted to my examiners Professor Robyn Henderson and Dr Timothy E Jester for their thought-provoking and critical feedback on my thesis.

I am also grateful to Anthony Baird of the University of Canterbury for all his generous support and friendship. I am grateful to the University of Canterbury Scholarship Department and all the university administration, logistics, security, library, and academic staff without whose support this journey could not be possible. I am also indebted to Immigration New Zealand for granting me visas to pursue my studies in this amazing country. I salute my dear friends Chris McMaster and Ralph Brown and my good roommates Trudy Barrett and Safayet Alam. I am also indebted to my Kiwi family Juliet Fry, John Tuke, and Becky Tuke. I have a long list of personal and professional friends and colleagues whose presence in my life made my journey more colourful, fruitful, and joyful and I am grateful to them all. I am grateful to every participant of this study and their families for their time and hospitality and for everything they taught me. My heartfelt gratitude also goes to my sisters and brother for remaining my inspirations in life. Last but not least, my love, Shabnam Raouf Habibyar, thank you for your presence and support in this journey and in my life!



**Abstract:**

This qualitative study presents the voices of Afghan educational activists working in the current context of Afghanistan. It examines their stories and reflects on their thoughts and perspectives about education in order to foreground their concerns regarding the current status and issues of Afghan education. The stories of the activists shed light on the relation of power and education since the rise of the pro-communist regime in the 1970s to the present time.

As a social constructivist concerned about the multiple ways that people make meaning of the world my epistemological position contributed to my choice of narrative inquiry as my methodological approach and as a means of communication with my participants and collection of participants' stories of activism. Narrative inquiry provided my participants an opportunity to share their stories and express their thoughts and perspectives with me.

The findings of this thesis indicate that the roots of the problems with Afghan education are historic and that the socio-political and religious attitudes that restrict education are deeply and widely embedded in the religious and political ideologies that rule the country, peoples' traditional beliefs, and the constant foreign interventions in Afghanistan affairs. Findings also illustrate that Afghan schools are not neutral institutions and invariably support the status quo. While the majority of the population including most of the teachers do not question the status quo, the voices of the educational activists presented in this thesis provide invaluable insights into why they challenge the status quo, why their voices matter, and how they signal hope.

This study not only brings forth the voices of the Afghan educational activists but also contributes towards the understanding of effective ways of empowering Afghan schools to have an impact over the larger community to create a stable Afghanistan that would enjoy peace, social justice, rule of law, humanity, and democracy.

# Chapter 1

## 1.1: Introduction

This thesis expressing the views of Afghan educational activists in present-day Afghanistan reflects their thoughts and perspectives on the status and direction of education in their society. It uses existing localized knowledge of the ancient Afghan mystical poet Rumi as an analytical lens to examine the value of the voices of these educational activists who are the participants of this study. It also presents selected contemporary educational concepts from the perspective of philosopher and thinker Paulo Freire, supported by the prominent western educationalist John Dewey. These selected concepts include: praxis and critical pedagogy, dialogue, and social reconstruction. These theoretical perspectives and concepts provide invaluable insights into the current issues of Afghan education. The thesis concludes with the implications of the study, and recommendations for the future.

As reflection on the ‘activism’ of the participants is a key purpose of this research, the intention is to expose the readers to the nature of activism in Afghanistan and the importance of the voices of the activists.

On March 19<sup>th</sup> 2015, a 27-year-old Afghan woman named Farkhundah stepped into a mosque in the heart of Kabul and challenged a traditional faith healer whom Afghans call ‘Tawiz nawis’. These faith healers supply scraps of paper with religious verses on them that are supposed to have healing powers. Farkhundah, who believed that the business of this man was dishonest and against what Islam taught, tried to persuade the old man to give up his business. The Tawiz nawis felt threatened by Farkhundah, and soon their conversation became fierce. The Tawiz nawis started yelling that Farkhundah had burnt and desecrated the Quran, which is holy to Muslims. Soon as many as sixty men sitting inside and around the mosque formed an angry mob and attacked Farkhundah. They beat her mercilessly with sticks and stones, kicked her and punched her, tore her clothes, and with the help of an angry policeman threw her from a roof.

As soon as the news spread, a famous and high-ranking Mullah (religious scholar) praised the mob for their “heroism” and threatened that if the government arrested them, he would mobilise people against the government. The warning of the Mullah was not a new phenomenon. When the Afghan King Amanullah Khan took his first steps towards the modernisation of Afghanistan in 1919, the Mullahs of that time formed many angry mobs around the country, accusing the King of paganism (Poullada,

1973b), and calling him an infidel (Adamec, 1967). They then forced him into exile where he died. At that time the majority of the people were quiet and did not support the King. On the other hand, in the present case, people, and in particular women, did speak out in defence of Farkhundah though she was an ordinary Afghan who stood against what she perceived as superstitious practices.

The death of Farkhundah, however, brought thousands of men and women on to the streets of Kabul, Herat, and Mazar demanding justice for her. As The Guardian newspaper reported, for the first time in the history of Afghanistan a group of women carried the coffin of Farkhundah on their shoulders and showed a united stand against the religious Mullah who had congratulated the mob. On March 28<sup>th</sup>, Farozan Marofi, a reporter of The Guardian, quoting one of the women activists who carried Farkhundah's body, wrote:

“It was the very first time in Afghanistan – maybe in the entire Islamic world – that women took a dead body to the grave” (Guardian, 2015).

In the light of media reports, it appears to me, as an Afghan who grew up in Afghanistan, and having personal knowledge of the context and history of the country, that this group of Afghan women made history by breaking two taboos that had long been the practice of the Afghan people. First, they stood against a powerful Mullah. Second, they dared to carry the body of Farkhundah on their shoulders, becoming the first women to publicly take an active part in a funeral, as this had previously been the job of men only.

Activists such as Farkhundah and the women who carried her body on their shoulders and said ‘no’ to the oppression of Mullahs are in the front line of the social and cultural transformation in Afghanistan. They are some of the most vulnerable people who risk their lives to bring about change in the war-torn country. Their action in carrying the coffin and coming out on to the streets to call for justice, was perhaps one of the strongest instances of activism in recent history. The participants I selected for this study, both men and women, show significant resemblance in their actions to the women who carried Farkhundah's coffin. These participants are focused on issues in education. They speak up and share their concerns publicly in ways that are sometimes contrary to the ‘official’ views of many government officials and religious leaders, and donor nations and organisations. These activists view education as a key to peace, equality, social justice, democracy and stability. They believe that the current education system does not promote these virtues, thus they fight for change to the education system, and challenge

the status quo. They often seem to try to be the voice of the masses in the way they relate to the Afghan authorities and religious and tribal leaders, and offer a counter narrative of possibilities.

## **1.2: Statement of the problem**

In the post-Taliban transition, the international community spent millions of dollars to support education in Afghanistan (Hogg & Ebooks, 2013). Doe's (2014) research shows that hundreds of school buildings were built and the number of students going to schools increased significantly compared to the time of the Taliban. However, the quality of education remained poor, students passive, and schools remained disengaged from the realities of the communities. For example, prior research I have conducted, (Habibyar, (2009) indicates that pedagogical styles and methods remain highly traditional and mostly focused on mere memorisation and content coverage.

Though a small number, the participants I interviewed for this study, and whom I refer to as 'activists', raise their voices calling for reform of education and transparency in the use of aid money in rebuilding the Afghan education system. It is evident in the regular posts these activists make on their Facebook pages and other social media websites that they continually challenge the status quo of the current education system. They sometimes even seem to be angry at what goes on in schools. In their view the passive role of schools can be blamed on not only the corruption and nepotism in the system but also on the current forms of the traditional, political, and tribal infrastructures, as well as illiteracy and lack of a democratic culture. It is clear from their public posts that these activists believe strongly in the need for change in the education system.

A review of selected recent literature on Afghan education, as outlined in Chapter 2, indicates that the voice of these local activists, who include teacher activists, public intellectuals, and parents, has been mainly missing from the discussion of the future of education in Afghanistan. Therefore their voices mostly remain on their own social media pages and are hardly reflected on or engaged in ways to inform education policy and practice. Reports of international donors, the Afghan Ministry of Education (MoE), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and the United Nations (UN) are mainly focused on figures and numbers, and issues of social 'progress' in the country as viewed through their own lenses. This has resulted in the neglect of the voices of the local people, and in particular the critical voices of Afghan educational activists.

### **1.3: About the Researcher**

My experiences in schools in many ways represent a history of contemporary education in Afghanistan. I started primary school in 1989 when the Soviet Union was withdrawing from Afghanistan. The first page of the schoolbooks started with symbols of the pro-communist parties and most books contained Marxist and pro-communist theories.

In 1992 when anti-Soviet Mujahidin guerrillas came to power, they distributed new textbooks. I was 9 years old and had just started 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Textbooks contained strange maths problems. For instance, “Ahmad killed 13 Russian soldiers with his gun, with the same gun he kills another 12 the next day; how many soldiers has he killed in total?” When my father and uncles attended school during King Zahir Khan’s reign, teachers taught them maths by using the pictures and models of fruit or animals, for example. However, Mujahidin seemed to teach the culture of war and hate through school textbooks to manipulate children’s minds so they would join the Jihadis later on.

In 1995, when the Taliban came to power, they shut school doors on girls. Most of my male classmates also left school. Those who remained in the public schools received mostly religious education in a radicalised interpretation of the Taliban’s view of Islam.

Like in many educated Afghan families, a culture of poetry reading was strong in my family. My father recited poems from the humanist mystical poets such as Rumi to teach my sisters and me about respect, tolerance, empathy, love, and humanity. My father made me take five hours of English each day in addition to going to school. Eventually when my English was good enough to allow me to teach, he encouraged me to teach girls literacy and language during the rule of the Taliban. I risked teaching girls in secret as the Taliban would not allow them to get an education. I was 15 years old. Education had become my passion and my core belief to be able to make a difference. After the Taliban were removed from power, I was one of the first English teachers to teach girls in a formal setting in Herat. I loved the idea of helping others and to me it meant being engaged in making a difference in the lives of those deprived of their rights. In 2002 I started my undergraduate education in the faculty of education at Herat University. After finishing my undergraduate years, I became a lecturer at Herat University.

The events in my life resulted in my vast interest in education and my passion for making a difference through education. The irony is that I experienced education under

the worst conditions that perhaps any human being could be educated under in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I received some of my secondary education during the time of the Taliban when schools were in the hands of fundamentalists who I view as fanatics. My school principal and religious teachers who were members or followers of the Taliban beat me severely for no reason. I witnessed how some of the most educated and experienced teachers were humiliated, beaten, and expelled from school. I experienced in person how education can be manipulated and deformed into a damaging process of teaching ideologies of war and hate to schoolchildren.

Despite all the negative experiences and events in my life, I persevered because my father had a dream to raise my sisters and me to be educated for a better future. The dream of my father and the support of my mother opened up opportunities for me that not only saved my life, but inspired me to make a difference in the lives of others. During the Taliban regime when girls were forbidden from getting an education, I dared to teach girls in secret, although this was very risky. I taught them literacy and language courses. I am devoted to helping Afghan children's education and it is a reason for doing this PhD.

When I started my PhD study at the University of Canterbury, I came across the writings of Paulo Freire. What touched my heart about his philosophy was his belief that education could either humanise or dehumanise (Freire, 1996) people, meaning humans have the capacity to become more fully human as well as the capacity to become less human depending on the kind of education they receive. I resonate with his argument that education is not neutral (Freire, 1985) and neither are the schools. Given my past experience and my aims for Afghan education, my immediate reaction to this philosophy was to wonder, "What do schools in Afghanistan do? Do they humanise students or dehumanise? If both, to what extent do they humanise and to what extent do they dehumanise children and how?"

Though many research papers and reports have been published on education in Afghanistan, there has been little that reflects the voices of the local educational activists. These activists, however, raise concerns on their blogs and social media pages that seem to me to be similar to my concerns, and my questions about humanising education. I resonate strongly with their call for change in schools that could promote peace, equality, and democracy in the country. My life experiences as an Afghan citizen, my knowledge of context and the process of knowing and selecting the participants helped me connect to the participants strongly.

#### **1.4: Purpose and Significance of this study**

Aside from my professional life, throughout my experience of growing up in Afghanistan, it is my impression that there are three types of people in the country with regard to attitudes towards education. There are those in a position of power, such as the politicians, tribal leaders and the religious Ulama (scholars) who have dominated education for the past four decades and have used it to teach children ideologies during the different regimes in power. The second type is those locals who form the majority of the population. Their attitude is to avoid risks, be indifferent, or otherwise remain neutral towards the actions of those in power regardless of what schools teach their children. The third group are those who oppose the domination of the rulers and believe that education must promote virtues such as tolerance, equality, and social justice as well as to contribute towards a stronger economy for the country. Historically many from this group of people had to go into exile, or risk being imprisoned, or even killed for speaking out.

The people I selected to interview are reflective of the third group of individuals, those who put their lives at risk to speak out and fight for social change through education. This category of people I knew would be willing to freely share their stories with me as they do on their own blogs. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to bring forth and privilege the voices of these local Afghan educational activists, in order to expand the wider conversation of Afghan education beyond that typically found in formal research, government documentation, and official reports from international organisations. Hearing the voice of these activists can contribute significantly in viewing education through a localised lens, as they are on the ground closer to the reality and can better expose the current issues and concerns with Afghan education.

#### **1.5: Outline of Thesis Chapters**

This thesis is organised into five subsequent chapters. Chapter 2 examines and presents a summary of selected literature on Afghan education. It sheds light on the history of Afghanistan with a focus on the changes since the 1960s. Chapter 2 also elaborates on the existing local knowledge and presents Rumi's philosophy that would later serve as a lens and analytical tool for better understanding of the activists' voices in the findings chapters. This chapter also elaborates the philosophies of Paulo Freire and John Dewey around selected contemporary concepts such as 'praxis', 'dialogue', and

‘social reconstruction’ to understand how they inform the concerns of the Afghan educational activists about the poor quality of education and the passive role of schools.

My methodological approach to this research is presented in Chapter 3. This chapter describes the overall process used for initiating, implementing, and writing this research study.

Chapters 4 and 5 present the stories and perspectives of the ‘activists’ who are the participants in this research. The stories and themes presented in these chapters reflect the thoughts, perspectives, and life events of 11 Afghan educational activists and their visions for the future of education. Chapter 5 also provides a discussion of interpretation and analysis of the findings and what insights they offer for the future of Afghan education.

Chapter 6 reflects on the findings of this study to offer implications for policy and practice. It concludes with suggestions for further studies on key issues related to education in Afghanistan.



## **Chapter 2**

### **Situating Educational Activism**

#### **2.1: Introduction to the Chapter**

In this chapter, I first review selected literature on the current status and issues in Afghan education that are directly relevant to my work. I provide a summary of the history of Afghan education to set the context for situating and understanding the perspectives and narratives of the ‘activists’ captured for this research. I also examine the terms ‘activism’ and ‘activist’ in the context of education and how they have been used in other contexts.

Following this overview of key literature, I then examine both an Afghan and selective Western philosophical perspectives which could inform current issues and future directions for Afghan education. First I present the philosophy of the Afghan mystic Rumi to illustrate what insights his perspectives offer to understanding traditional Afghan education. This section is followed by presentation of selected contemporary educational concepts from the perspective of philosopher and thinker Paulo Freire and supported by the prominent Western educationalist John Dewey. These selected concepts include: praxis and critical pedagogy, dialogue, and social reconstruction. The chapter concludes with how the literature presented determined the nature of my study, and provides the context for situating activism in Afghan education.

#### **2.2: History and Context**

For centuries Afghanistan was at the crossroads for many great conquerors and empire builders of the world. Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, the Mogul conquerors of India all scaled her passes and conquered her cities. The great silk caravans regularly traversed her borders in their travels from the Orient to Europe (Adamec, 1991).

Zoroaster preached his doctrines in the ancient city of Balkh, on the left bank of the Oxus River, now called the Amu Darya. The magnificent remains of Buddhist culture at Bamyan, destroyed by the Taliban in 2001 (Crews & Tarzi, 2008) attested to that city's former position as a spiritual centre. As Adamec (1991) noted, for more than two thousand years Afghanistan has remained a geopolitically strategic country in south and central Asia.

Benjamin, a researcher who visited Afghanistan in the 1950s during the reign of King Zahir Khan and whose findings were only recently published in 2011, describes Afghan people as 'vigorous and proud' protecting the sovereignty of their country for thousands of years. The findings and arguments of Benjamin, unlike most research conducted in the past four decades of war, provide a more positive view towards Afghan education. History and context through the lens of Benjamin perhaps balances how Afghan history and the current situation is presented in the media today, and thus there has been an intentional focus on incorporating his work in this section.

Afghan tribes have lived along the foothills of the Hindu Kush mountains, on the banks of the great rivers that run from the snowcapped peaks for thirty centuries (Gladstone, 2001). They raised crops, hunted game, and followed their flocks in their harsh but fruitful land (Keane, 1880). Because of this, Benjamin (2011) describes Afghanistan as a country of great importance materially with rich mineral resources, and great potential for hydroelectric output from its fast-flowing rivers (p. 68). He maintains that Afghanistan possesses tremendous irrigation possibilities in fertile valleys that could become among the wealthiest in Asia if the country were at peace.

In the 1800s and 1900s the Afghan kings recognised that a new kind of education was needed to prepare the people of Afghanistan for a more civilised country and for building relations with other nations. According to Benjamin these kings believed that

the future of Afghanistan required the establishment of a system of modern universal education. He insists that the greatest resource Afghanistan has, the resource without which the lesser resources could never be properly used, lies in the latent abilities of the people and particularly the youth of Afghanistan (p. 69).

Benjamin explains that a unique decentralised education system existed during King Zahir Khan's reign, which no longer exists today. The nomads had teachers who taught them in portable schools travelling with the caravans in different parts of the country. These nomads would set up one school tent for men and boys, and another for women and girls. What stands out about the educational curriculum of that time is that in all the country through which the nomads passed, the curriculum would be derived from the activities, needs, and wants of all the nomads, the environment around them, and the children and adults who received education. Benjamin maintains that the education for the wandering tribes and the agricultural communities was regarded as extremely important. Nomads' schools and the rural village schools were signs of hope that one day people would develop solutions that would make Afghanistan once more a hub of civilisation (p. 69).

Fewer researchers seem to have viewed Afghanistan and the Afghan people through such a positive and promising lens as Benjamin. He conducted his research at the time of King Zahir Khan in the 1950s during peace, and his notes reflect the different aspects of Afghan society since King Abdul Rahman Khan who reigned from 1880-1901 (p. 73) through Zahir Khan's reign. Benjamin's positive attitude towards Afghanistan can be summed up in a question he poses about the future of Afghanistan:

"Is it too much to hope that some day — some day soon — they will produce from that shadow uniquely Afghan features of the greatest man-saving and man-inspiring education that Asia or the world has ever seen? (p. 74)."

The positive view of Benjamin towards Afghanistan is significantly important because most of the reports written on Afghanistan or the news that comes from Afghanistan for the past four decades have been negative. Such negative outlook tends to promote the general belief among both Afghans and the wider global community that there is no hope for Afghanistan. It also affects the identity of the Afghan people, who are seen as people constantly engaged in war, and this undermines the abilities and will of the Afghan people in creating a future of hope and happiness for themselves and their children.

### **2.2.1: Modernisation of Education**

Although signs of modernisation were apparent in Afghanistan in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, dramatic reforms towards modernisation were initiated in some cities of Afghanistan by King Amanullah and his father-in-law Mahmud Tarzi, a well-educated and modernist individual in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Levi, 1972). Gregorian (1969) argues that Tarzi and many other Afghan modernists including poets, writers and historians regarded modernisation, as understood in this era, as a prescription for the reform of Afghan culture, renovation of spirituality, and the rebirth of the country. He states:

They (Mahmud Tarzi and other modernists of that period) attempted to demonstrate not only the individual benefits of modern education and learning but also the desperate need for knowledge in all Islamic societies. The new generation of modernists specially praised science and technology, and exhorted their countrymen to view modern civilisation as the result of effort and applied knowledge. Without the accoutrements of technology-machinery, factories, industries, skilled workers, training programmes-Afghanistan would constantly be dependent on outsiders and could never achieve real independence (p. 343).

According to Gregorian, the attempts of the modernist kings, scholars, and mystical poets to promote modern and secular education prepared Afghanistan to embrace progressive democracy and development during King Zahir Khan's reign. He maintains that conflicts of interests between the modernists and the mullahs who

preferred old and traditional ways affected the education system throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in Afghanistan. The clash between secular and traditional education has existed since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Significant practical steps were taken by King Amanullah Khan for expansion of modern education throughout cities of Afghanistan (Poullada, 1973a). Adamec (1991) explains that the king established new schools including a school for girls and incorporated French, German, and English as major languages in the curriculum. He developed and put into practice a constitution that guaranteed equal rights and personal freedom for all Afghan people. According to him the first teacher-training school in Afghanistan was established during Amir Habibullah Khan's reign in 1913 where the majority of teachers were local mullahs from the religious madrasas. The first school for girls in Afghanistan was opened in 1924, and primary education became free and compulsory by law for all children in 1931.

### **2.2.2: Education in King Zahir Khan's time: Emergence of Secular Education**

Muhammad Zahir Shah, the king of Afghanistan 1933-1973, was born in 1914 and received his education in Kabul and France. During his reign he gradually brought some democratic reforms to the government system in Afghanistan. Adamec (1991) writes that the king designed a constitution that excluded the royal family members from certain government positions, and announced free elections for a bicameral parliament he established. He encouraged and supported a free press and the formation of political parties (p. 243). During the king's reign a dual educational system existed; that is a traditional system under the mullahs and a newly established secular system created by the king. The elites of society produced by these two systems competed for government positions; however the graduates of the secular system took better advantage of the system and the development process and job opportunities. The king took a further step

towards reducing the influence of traditional religiously based education. By integrating some of the religious madrasas into the governmental education system, he reduced the negative influence of a radicalised interpretation of religion and its use against the system. Adamec notes:

During the reign of Zahir Shah 'q.v., 1933-73' the Afghan system of education was further expanded and extended to the provinces. Kabul University was formally established ... In the 1950s, theology, agriculture, and economics departments were founded, and in the 1960s home economics, education, engineering, pharmacy, and a polytechnic institute were established (p. 72).

He further states that the king and his wife, Queen Humaira, supported new establishments in the education system to promote modern education and educational opportunities for women in Afghanistan. Education was regarded as highly important: Coeducation was resumed again in the early 1960s at Kabul University. A woman's institute was started in 1946 in Kabul under the sponsorship of Queen Humaira, wife of Zahir Shah (p. 73).

Reflecting on the progress during the king's reign, Adamec asserts that by 1970 secondary, vocational schools and teachers' training schools existed in every province except Zabul province. Technical, commercial, and agricultural schools were active in Kabul and several provincial towns. The promotion of the education sector was at the top of the king's agenda for Afghanistan. His educational initiatives aimed to promote both quality of education and equality within the education system.

Gregorian (1969) notes that the king regarded education as the most crucial and fundamental item in modernising the government programmes. According to him, modernisation was not the only goal of education, but "education was also perceived as an instrumentality to achieve national unity and promote national consciousness" (p. 351). To the king modernisation implied industrial revolution and the incorporation of a more secular society in the highly traditional Afghan society. He explains that

noteworthy changes were made in attitudes towards educational opportunities for women in the 1950s during the reign of King Zahir Khan, and the progressive nature of education continued through Afghanistan President Daud Khan's time until 1978.

### **2.2.3: Education in President Daud Khan's time: Integration of Women**

Born in 1909 in Kabul, Sardar Muhammad Daud became the first President of Afghanistan in July 1973 after he staged a peaceful coup against his cousin King Zahir Khan. He established a republican government with himself as president until his assassination in April 1978 (Gregorian, 1969). According to Adamec (1991), Daud Khan was also educated in Kabul and France and was regarded as a liberal thinker who highly valued modern education and the promotion of women's rights. As Adamec notes:

He encouraged social reforms and in 1959 permitted women to abandon the veil, thus contributing to their emancipation and participation in the economic life of Afghanistan. He initiated two five-year plans (1956-61 and 1962-67) and a seven year plan in 1976, and relied for military and development aid on the Soviet Union (p. 163).

Gregorian (1969) states that Daud Khan established new educational institutions in Kabul and several other provinces of Afghanistan and paid special attention to women's education. Education was in progress and schools and teachers were regarded as important assets of Afghan society by the government and some of the people. Students who graduated after six years of schooling possessed enough knowledge and skills to work in a functional government system. Daud Khan increased privileges for teachers and encouraged more women teachers to engage in the schools. Zulfacar (2006) notes that at this time women's participation in national life was again encouraged and more women started working in the government. The government of Daud Khan gave women equal rights under law, guaranteeing women's dignity, compulsory education, and freedom to work.

Adamec (1991) describes the presidency of Daud Khan in the 1970s as one of the most progressive decades of peace, freedom, and development in the modern history of Afghanistan. Although many Afghan people view Daud Khan as a reformist who was pro-democracy, some of his political decisions to control other rising political parties in Afghanistan at the time created tensions that resulted in the civil war. In 1978 a military coup by the pro-communist factions in the country put an end to the progressive decade of Daud Khan. He and his family were killed in the presidential palace in Kabul.

#### **2.2.4: From Pro-communism to the Rise of the Mujahidin: Emergence of Fundamentalist Views of Education**

After the pro-communist parties assassinated Daud Khan and his family, the parties took control of the country. The government of the 1980s was pro-communist and Marxist. Marxist theories and ideas were strongly incorporated into the education curriculum from primary to tertiary level (Magnus & Naby, 1998). Afghan women possessed freedom and had a strong engagement in decision-making positions in the Afghan government (Downing, 2008). However, the rise of the pro-communist regime also resulted in the creation of their opponents; anti-Soviet Mujahidin.

According to Zulfacar (2006), from 1989 to 1996 during Mujahidin control, Afghanistan experienced years of widespread lawlessness, brutalities, rape of women and daily civic abuses. She notes that Afghan women became targets of the political agendas of the Mujahidin; they were marginalised, and discriminated against. Unlike the Taliban's organised and institutionalised behaviour towards women, the Mujahidin's treatment of women was unorganised and unplanned and was not institutionalised. While women and girls were allowed to go to school under the Mujahidin, they lived under strict rules. Zulfacar maintains that Afghan women were the victims of endemic rape, assault and abduction during Mujahidin control. Zulfacar's findings resonate with the



argument of Povey (2003) stating that the subjugation that women faced under the Mujahidin warlords has been described as one of the worst, with the Taliban's regime being the harshest for women.

Magnus and Naby (1998) argue that with the rise of Mujahidin guerrillas, infrastructures including the educational infrastructures broke down. Each political or tribal group that came to power exercised its own ideological agenda through the curriculum. The parties in power used education to teach children ideologies and beliefs that promoted the causes of those parties, their political and economic interests, and their ideological beliefs. Similarly, Spink (2005) notes that most Afghan scholars, university professors and authors went into exile during the rule of the Taliban and Mujahidin resulting in a brain drain and loss of the nation's intellectual assets.

#### **2.2.5: Education Under the Taliban: Death of Equality**

The Taliban and the Mujahidin had their similarities and differences. Both groups had highly conservative views on women while the Taliban's Sharia law - strict religious rules practised by highly religious Muslims - gave no social rights to women and the only right that women during the rule of the Taliban preserved was the right of movement under strict rules. For example, they had to be fully covered when in public. The Mujahidin, though they restricted many rights of women, let women continue their teaching profession. However, their appearance on TV was banned in most parts of Afghanistan. Magnus and Naby (1998) write that politically, the Taliban and the Mujahidin were against each other and the Taliban fought and defeated the Mujahidin in 1994. The Taliban's educational policies, curriculum, and practices were based on their Islamic beliefs and views. Povey (2003) states that atrocities were committed during Taliban control, and freedom restricted for the public particularly for women. Schools for girls were closed, and women and girls were prohibited from working in the public

sphere. Povey maintains that the Taliban justified all their actions under their strict religious views.

Most of the Taliban belonged to the poorest and the least literate southern Pashtun areas of Afghanistan. For example, in the village where Mullah Omar, the leader of the Taliban, was born and raised, no girls or women attended schools (Marsden, 1998). When the Taliban took power in 1995, they began the process of turning boys' schools into religious madrasas where little attention was paid to any science subjects (Crews & Tarzi, 2008). Crews and Tarzi (2008) note that in most cases, girls were not allowed to carry any kind of books with them at all. In the schools, male teachers and students had to abide by the restrictive policies of the Taliban to be able to attend. All teachers and students were forced to wear turbans and had to wear traditional Afghani clothes on school premises.

#### **2.2.6: Education Post Taliban: From Extremism to Democracy**

After the collapse of the Taliban in 2001, Afghanistan tried to move from a tradition of isolation from the outside world to integration with the world. Historically one of the reasons for Afghanistan's isolation from the rest of the world was Afghan suspicion of any foreign nation given the repeated attempts to colonise Afghanistan such as those during the reigns of King Abdul Rahman Khan and King Amanullah who fought the British. Thus, some Afghans see the US invasion of Afghanistan as just another episode of colonisation. The post-Taliban transition brought significant changes in the lives of the people. In 2001 in the last year of the Taliban, no local Afghan had access to the internet or cell phones. In 2014, more than half of the population of Afghanistan had access to cell phones and ten million people accessed the internet (Shahnaz et al., 2014). Many young Afghan men and women were connected to the world outside Afghanistan

through the internet. In the post-Taliban era, the international community spent millions of dollars in aid to reform education.

The first minister appointed to the Ministry of Education was Rasul Amin, son of a tribal leader, and he was followed by three other political figures. Each minister developed a strategic plan for what education should look like during his years in the ministry. While Amin's vision presented a more moderate form of education, former minister of education Mohammad Hanif Atmar's strategic plan emphasised the quality of education and human capital that might represent the most liberal view of education post Taliban. Nazmul and Arif (2012), however, assert that the strategy of the current minister, Farooq Wardak, focuses on the religious perspectives of education with little indication of promotion of quality and equality in the system (Nazmul & Arif, 2012).

In the Ministry of Education (MoE) strategic plans developed by ministers Hanif Atmar, Qanooni, and Amin, principles and values of Islam were highly reflected and emphasised. Of all the ministers, Atmar's vision focused more on the development of vibrant human capital and equal access to quality education. For instance, the National Strategic Plan of Atmar (Education, 2010) states, "the constitution of Afghanistan makes it illegal to refuse access to schools on the ground of gender, faith, or ethnicity" (p. 13). It also addresses issues of poor quality of education and the contributing factors with a focus on modern education that would lead to development.

When Hanif Atmar delivered his candidature speech to the Afghan Parliament in 2006, the issue of religious madrasa education was central. He clarified the crucial importance of the Ministry of Education having control over the religious madrasas to prevent radicalisation of religious education. Atmar won support across the political spectrum from Afghan nationalists. This shows both the importance of the relationship between religion and education and its highly political nature (Borchgrevink, 2013).

Zulfacar's (2006) study shows that throughout Afghanistan's history and continuing today, the disconnect between social reality and centralised, political decisions has resulted in policy decisions that failed to have sustainable impact on the lives of the people. As such, educational initiatives to promote concepts such as gender equality were not firmly based on the needs and wants of the local communities, but on an overall vision of the technocrats who were mostly educated in the West. According to her the emphasis on mass education has been used to promote assimilation within a diverse nation rather than as a means of teaching relevant skills, which could help sustainably improve living conditions (p. 54).

### **2.3: The Current Status and Issues in Education in Afghanistan**

The review of selected literature on the current status of Afghan education suggests that Afghan schools face significant challenges in addressing the vital needs of the nation such as peace, democracy, equality, and social justice. Islam (2007) argues that international funding for education is driven by the expectation that Afghan schools would contribute towards peace, stability, equality and social engagement. World donors such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), World Bank, the United Nations (UN), Asian Development Bank, and some nations dedicated billions of dollars to rebuilding Afghanistan (Hogg & Ebooks, 2013) including her educational infrastructures. Reports of the office of Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR, 2015) indicate that as of 2014, the US government alone contributed more than \$104 billion towards reconstruction of Afghanistan. The report also indicates, as of March 31, 2015, USAID disbursed \$769 million in support of Afghanistan's education sector. The result of the money poured into Afghanistan to rebuild its education system has been mixed.

Jackson's (2011) study on the 'Back to School' campaign, a UN-led initiative with the Afghanistan government launched in 2002 post Taliban, shows that the campaign made enormous gains in increasing the enrolment of the children in schools. The study reveals that the donors contributed approximately \$1.9 billion to rebuilding the education system in the initial years post Taliban. While Hemati (2011) reports that the first initiative of the Afghan government to change the Taliban's religious and radicalised school textbooks was a success, Shayan (2015) points out that the strategy failed to promote a more secular education system at tertiary level.

A major issue in relation to education in the literature I reviewed has been criticism of the international aid system. Mubarez (2014) argues that between 70 and 80 per cent of foreign assistance to address social needs in Afghanistan has been 'phantom aid', and people in dire need of the funds never received it. He explains that some of the aid money is spent on goods and services from the donor countries or the money goes straight to contractor salaries and overhead costs (p. 56). Similarly, the report of SIGAR agency (2015) reveals that aid money has been misused and significant fraud has occurred in the use of the aid money in different sectors including education.

The research of Harmer, Stoddard, and DiDomenico (2011) identifies insecurity as a major issue in the process of helping Afghan education through aid. They maintain that because insurgent and extremist groups believe that unlike food, water, and medicine, education is not a human need for survival, these insurgents conduct systematic attacks on school teachers, students, and infrastructures. Harmer notes that insurgents argue that education is a state-building feature and an investment in strengthening human capacity and the society. The insurgents believe that education advances modernity so therefore they justify their actions of targeting students, teachers, and schools. Harmer maintains that despite the progress post Taliban, Afghanistan as a

country affected by conflict faces severe challenges in the education system. However, Sigsgaard (2011) points out that in order to challenge these challenges, the Afghan Ministry of Education joined the Fast Track Initiative (FTI) in 2009 to gain additional funding to achieve the goals of its National Education Strategic Plan. He explains that though the initiative gained the funds and resulted in the construction of several school buildings and an opportunity for more school girls and boys to enter schools, it made little impact in promoting the quality of education. His argument is that one of the main reasons was that the process focused mainly on physical infrastructures rather than on everyday learning.

The Transparency International organisation (TI, 2014) and the SIGAR agency (2015) published significant reports about the imbalanced aid approach. I reviewed the studies of Spink (2005), Shayan (2015), and Farah Azam (2014) to examine how their research findings might increase understanding of the imbalances in the aid system. The overall argument of these authors suggests that because of the focus of the aid system on increasing the numbers of students, teachers and buildings while the quality of education remained poor, support for education was not balanced. The arguments of these authors are supported by Hemati (2011) arguing that despite the disbursement of billions of dollars by the donors, a large part of the development funding has not reached the most vulnerable groups of the population including teachers. His study suggests that such funding has partly been returned to donor countries in the form of international workers' wages and foreign corporate benefits.

To clarify the problem with the aid system, Trani, Nandipati, and Bakhshi (2012) criticise donors articulating that the development programmes in Afghanistan are largely defined by donor agencies, which establish their own priorities based partly on evidence but mainly on the international community political agenda. They maintain that because

development programmes have not been based on a clear understanding of the needs of Afghan society, Afghanistan still faces extreme challenges in all arenas including education. Trani concludes that in addition to the challenges the aid system poses; insecurity, war, poverty, cultural and traditional attitudes towards girls' and children with special needs remain major challenges.

Insecurity and poverty are described as two other major challenges facing Afghan education. A report of the United Nations Children's Fund UNICEF branch in the Netherlands (UNICEF, 2013) also shows the negative impact of insecurity and poverty on education, noting that between 50 and 80 per cent of the schools have been closed in conflict-affected areas. This report indicates that enrolment and attendance rates in areas of conflict is low due to the closure of schools by insurgents, the lack of infrastructure, insecurity and poverty that forces children to support their families to make a living. The report also indicates that throughout much of the country the quality of education is low and schools are understaffed for the numbers of students they have to serve. The report maintains that the teachers in most schools in Afghanistan are not qualified for teaching and essentially need capacity building assistance to support children. It also revealed that in the midst of this decline in educational access, sexual abuse and exploitation of girls and boys in the war-affected areas has been on the rise.

In the literature presented in the section above, three key areas arise: gender and women's education, the impact of the current educational challenges in the lives of teachers, and the role of religion in Afghan education. I elaborate each of these three themes below.

### **2.3.1: Gender and Women's Education in Afghanistan**

A key resource on the issue of women's education is Kissane's comprehensive research paper ((Kissane, 2012) The way forward for girls' education in Afghanistan),

which has tried to reflect the voices of Afghan women and in particular teachers, a strategy that resonates with my own research in this study. She argues that as women were deprived of the right to education during the Taliban regime, the current government and international community have given significant attention to education for women. She asserts that the dehumanisation of the female under the Taliban brought women to the centre of attention of the international community post-Taliban, and the Afghan government and its international allies have developed projects to ‘empower’ women.

Kissane continues her argument noting that in the post-Taliban era, despite the increase in the number of girls going to schools, the female members of Afghan society including teachers and students still face extraordinary challenges. Kissane finds that the number of female dropouts is high and many school-aged girls still do not have access to education. She lists poverty, early marriage, insecurity, and lack of family support, distance of schools from communities, and low quality of education as the main barriers limiting girls’ education. She further notes that the low levels of female participation in education are a significant challenge to the development of the country. Kissane also argues that traditions and religion, which are often inseparable, along with insecurity are the most important factors that create gender inequality in education. She thus maintains that the dominant religious people, in particular in the Pashtun tribe, believe that their job is to protect women and keep them at home. Therefore, despite the progress in changing women’s conditions post-Taliban, the opportunities for women have remained very limited.

Kissane concludes that the challenge to provide women with educational opportunities requires confronting security, ideological, traditional and logistical barriers. She insists that much still needs to be done and many years, even decades, are required



before Afghan women will truly be able to have a voice. She believes that “the claim of victory over the Taliban declared in 2001 seems tragically premature” (p. 12).

In conjunction with Kissane’s research, Sigsgaard provides significant insight into women’s education. (Sigsgaard (2011) *On the road to resilience: Capacity development with ministry of education in Afghanistan*). According to this report, the problems with gender equality go beyond communities and schools. Findings of this report also show that only 26 per cent of all MoE employees are female. Fewer women compete with men for high managerial positions due to internalised stereotypes of female inferiority. Males are the dominant gender in most governmental offices. The report also suggests that opportunities for females’ education are mostly self-driven. Sigsgaard’s viewpoints about the ‘self-driven’ initiatives of women are also evident in the findings of Kosha’s (2015) research.

Kosha, in reflecting on the status of school teachers, (Kosha, (2015) *The resilience of women in higher education in Afghanistan*), finds that self-confidence, positive attitudes, having life goals, and personal effort are some of the major reasons female students find their way to schools and universities in Afghanistan. Kosha’s findings disclose that families’ emotional support such as care, love, and encouragement also play an integral role in enabling females to pursue their education and their dreams. A list of the risks and obstacles that females encounter is documented in Kosha’s research. Among the main barriers that female students both from high school and university identified are cultural barriers such as pressure to get married and leave school, discrimination against girls, poverty, insecurity, and hopelessness about their future.

Despite the extreme challenges, however, both Kosha and Sigsgaard argue that there is hope for the future of females’ education and a better life for women. Kosha and

Sigsgaard's view on 'hope' is supported by Kissane (2012) who believes that education gives women the ability to break out of the oppression and subjugation that has prevented them from engaging in society for decades. She insists that through education, women could contribute to the community and realise their full potential. Women who were given a chance proved their capabilities, she points out. Drawing on the global research body, Kissane articulates a direct link between the length of time girls spend in school and their well-being, health, and economic empowerment. She concludes that the more educated the mothers, the more likely they will raise educated children.

Anne Brodsky's findings on the role of education in women's lives (Brodsky, Anne (2012) *Beyond (the ABCs): Education, community, and feminism in Afghanistan*) resonate with those of Kosha (2015) and Kissane (2012) articulating that despite the difficulties, hope remains high among Afghan women. They sum up their findings emphasising the significance of understanding the history of education that predated the Taliban's destructive policies and recent Western aid to be able to acknowledge the resilience of Afghan women and their vast interest in education. It is evident in the findings of these researchers and writers that educational opportunities for Afghan women have been limited throughout the pro-communist regime, Mujahidin, the Taliban, and the post-Taliban transition. These studies also show that Afghan women continue to resist oppression to create opportunities for themselves and fight for their rights.

### **2.3.2: Challenges and their Impact on Teachers' Lives and Students' Learning**

Kosha's (2015) study of women's resilience also reflects the economic status of female teachers. Her findings show that many teachers including women run small businesses to overcome poverty and meet the expenses of daily life. Kosha argues that these teachers get little or no time to reflect on their jobs, know students and students'

backgrounds or to prepare for a course. She explains that because of the rigidity of policy and curriculum, teachers do not possess within their authority the autonomy to make choices in their teaching styles in schools.

A broader challenge to teachers' lives is corruption in the educational system. Centner suggests that corruption creates major problems in the teaching profession (Centner (2012) Implementing international anti-corruption standards to improve Afghanistan's education system) According to him forced deployment of teachers to remote places puts them in difficult positions. In his findings, Mubarez (2014) shows that hundreds of thousands of dollars are embezzled each month paying 'ghost teachers' where instructors are not present or do not exist and yet draw salaries. This is while, according to Farah Azam (2014), teachers earn among the lowest salaries of any profession in the country. Teachers receive an equivalent of \$US74 per month. For many teachers this is only enough to pay the rent for a severely under-equipped mud house and feed their children on a survival level with perhaps one 'good meal' in a month.

Insecurity is another major challenge in the lives of teachers. According to Mubarez (2014) from 2004 to 2008, 722 attacks were reported on teachers, students, and educational facilities and between 2006 and 2009 more than 439 instructors and staff were killed on their way to school. His findings show that the Taliban continually send shabnamas (night letters) to communities in different parts of Afghanistan threatening them if they sent their children to school. These night letters demand people join the insurgent groups and keep their children and women home.

Another critical issue that affects teachers' status has been the long-term 'brain drain' resulting from the continual conflicts and wars. Studies by Jones (2009) and Hemati (2011) indicate that brain drain is one of the major problems that Aghan education is facing today. Some highly educated people including many teachers left

Afghanistan during the pro-communist regime and many others left during the Taliban and the Mujahidin. Hemati points out that the post-Taliban challenge of brain-drain has been that most of the young men and women, including many teachers, who receive scholarships never return to Afghanistan because of insecurity, leaving many schools with few or no professional teachers.

### **2.3.3: The Role of Religion in Afghan Education and the Process of Religious Reform**

Afghanistan is a Muslim country with 99 per cent of her population practising Islam. Prior to Islam, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and Hinduism were the most influential religious practices in Afghanistan. As an Afghan educator born and raised in Afghanistan, I believe that any study of Afghan education would be incomplete without reflecting on the role of religion in shaping attitudes towards education.

Levi shows a historical clash between modernists and religious people in Afghan society (Levi (1972) *The light garden of the angel king: Journeys in Afghanistan*). He presents an example of the obstacles against the reforms of King Amanullah in the 1900s when groups of religious clerics and tribal leaders rose up against the king, forcing him into exile in Italy and Switzerland until his death on April 26, 1960. Levi maintains that the tribal and religious leaders believed that opening schools for girls was paganism and the king had to be punished. This was rooted in the religious (Islamic) beliefs of Afghan traditionalists. Mansory argues that Islam is a fundamental part of the cultural identity of Afghans (Mansory (2005) *Islamic and modern education in Afghanistan - Conflictual or complementary?*). He states that “in politics, in everyday life, in mosque or office, Islam influences everyday life of many Afghans” (p. 4). His review of the history of Islam in Afghanistan suggests that from a tribal confederation till today in the Afghan state, politics and religion have been intimately connected (p. 3).

Furthermore, Zulfacar indicates that the correlation of tribal codes and practices with Islamic beliefs has created a moderate form of Islam in Afghanistan (Zulfacar (2006) *The pendulum of gender politics in Afghanistan*). She argues that Afghans are historically known for being relatively relaxed about Islamic ritual observances, and greatly appreciate poetry, music and the arts. Despite the historical unifying factor of Islam, she argues that in the past decades Islam became a 'lethal weapon' in the hands of extremists and a force of "division, fragmentation, and bloodletting" (p. 46).

Glad's research (Glad (2009) *Knowledge on fire: Attacks on education in Afghanistan*) resonates with Zulfacar's claim about the negative impact of religious extremism on Afghan education. Glad's study reveals strong ties between Pakistan religious madrasas and Afghan students. He argues that the militancy of religious education and its fundamentalist slant mostly developed during the jihad in the 1980s and during Taliban control in 1990s and continues till today. Glad and Zulfacar's findings are further strengthened by Mubarez's study (Mubarez (2014) *The youth bulge and higher education in Afghanistan: Challenges and the way forward*). Mubarez (2014) argues:

The Soviet war, coupled with the control of the educational system by Islamist or fundamentalist groups from 1992-2001 left a major cultural imprint on the new generation's thinking, even when the majority of the students had no political sympathies for the Islamists or the Taliban. Unlike the 1970s, Islam today dominates student-council groups in Afghan universities (p. 61).

Similarly, Magnus and Nabys argue that the shift from moderate Islam to radicalised Islam was particularly evident during the rule of the Mujahidin and the Taliban in the 1990s as Islamic education was used for political purposes (Magnus and Nabys (1998) *Afghanistan: Mullah, Marx, and Mujahidin*). Olesen extends this point by providing an informative and comprehensive argument supporting the critical consideration of the role of Islam in education (Olesen (1995) *Islam and politics in Afghanistan*). According to Olesen, Islam was introduced to Afghanistan in the 8<sup>th</sup> century and replaced the existing

religions. He argues that the same way that Islam influenced tribal beliefs and practices, tribal norms and codes influenced Islam, the major tribal code being Pashtunwali, the principal code of life of the Pashtuns on both sides of the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. He states that Islam became a symbol of national unification of the numerous Afghan ethno-tribal populations. He maintains that since the early 1900s when public schools and institutions were established, the education provided in these schools and institutions was mostly religious. Olesen further argues that the diversity of the culture created a more moderate form of Islam in Afghanistan that was different from that of the extremists and from the way Islam was viewed in some other Muslim countries. He insists that for most Afghans Islam is much more than politics. Olesen points out that the struggle to reform religious education and to integrate modern education in the education system in Afghanistan was initiated by King Amanullah 1919-1929 as he realized that parallel with the religious educational institutions, extension of the secular school system was a necessity for a functioning government.

I found Adamec's insights useful as they provide a historical background to the relationship between religion and education (Adamec (1967) *Afghanistan, 1900-1923: A diplomatic history* and (1991) *Historical dictionary of Afghanistan*). Adamec's books also reveal a continual clash between modernists and traditional religious groups in Afghanistan. Adamec believes that the modernisation process has been a significant cost for the Afghan people. He provides an example of such a clash between former King Abdul Rahman Khan and the religious groups. As Adamec (1967) quotes from the king in his book:

If I showed any inclination towards the English, said Abdur Rahman, Amir or King of Afghanistan 1880-1901 in his biography, my people would call me an infidel for joining hands with infidels, and they would proclaim a religious holy war against me (p. 7).

Adamec explains that the mullahs were the perpetual preachers of jihad. They were often the tools of their amirs (kings), but they were prepared to turn against their king if he showed any tendency of “unwarranted friendliness toward Britain or Russia” Adamec (1967, p. 8).

Borchgrevink, in a more recent study on the relationship between education and religion (Borchgrevink (2013) Transnational links of Afghan madrasas: Implications for reform of religious education), argues that all the 13 madrasas he studied belong to the Sunni Islamic sector which constitutes four fifths of the Afghan population. He maintains that one of the Sunni madrasas that had the most significant influence on the politicisation and militancy (p. 78) of the religious madrasas in the refugee camps was the Dar ul Uloom Deoband in Pakistan, which has influenced Afghanistan’s religious education sector specifically. Borchgrevink argues that many private madrasas in Afghanistan have been associated with the Pakistani Deobandi, a tradition deeply grounded in religious beliefs, with some of these schools growing increasingly political and militant during the Afghanistan jihad in the 1980s. He states that after September 11, 2001, and the fall of the Taliban regime, Afghan Islam was easily confused with political extremism and even with global terror in the Al Qaeda style. It was because of a lack of understanding that the form of Islam in Afghanistan was deeply grounded in the culture of the people.

Borchgrevink maintains that the religious beliefs and the different interpretations of Islam remained an issue of conflict in the process of modernisation of education in Afghanistan through modern history. His findings also indicate that in more recent decades, the Mujahidin and the Taliban used religion for their political interests and their ideological purposes more than any other political movement. The Mujahidin mostly recruited their fighters from the religious schools in the Afghan refugee camps in

neighbouring Iran and Pakistan. Religious education played an integral role in the recruitment of young fighters from these camps. The growing insurgency post Taliban and the increase in the use of suicide attacks by the Taliban were tied with the recruitment of Afghan religious students from Pakistani madrasas. This brought the issue of religious education to the centre of the Afghan government's attention.

In sum, the selection of studies and research articles I have reviewed here reveal that the Afghan education system encounters significant internal and external problems. The internal problems are corruption, lack of professional teachers, brain drain, domination of extreme religious views, tribal and traditional beliefs, and poor leadership in the ministry. The external problems are the unrealistic foreign aid strategy and the negative influence of neighbouring countries on education in Afghanistan. Though this summary of the selected literature provided insightful information about the current status of Afghan education and the issues around it, there is not a satisfactory reflection of the voices of local Afghans. These voices, particularly those highly concerned about education, could provide crucial insights into the way forward for Afghan education. In the following section, I examine and elaborate the terms 'activism' and 'activist' in relation to education.

#### **2.4: Educational Activists: Why Their Voice Matters**

Depending on the context, the concept of 'activism' implies slightly different meanings and yet there are common characteristics in all forms of activism regardless of the context. Anderston and Herrs (2007) suggest that some common acts of activism are revolutionary acts, political movements, demonstrations, letter writing, blogging, poetry, volunteering, and singing. Anderston and Herrs maintain that in most contexts activism is illustrated as working against the norms, challenging popular beliefs, opposing oppressive regimes or ideologies, and making an effort to change the status quo. They



argue that a sense of dissatisfaction with the way things are may inspire an individual or a group of individuals to constitute a form of activism. Anderson and Herr insist that activism is ingrained with risk.

As my aim was to understand both the common usage of the terms ‘activist’ and ‘activism’ in addition to the examination of the terms as scholarly concepts, I chose to use well-known English dictionaries to find definitions of common usage. For scholarly discourse I examine these concepts and the meaning they provide within scholarly used contexts. Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (2003) defines activism as “the use of direct and noticeable action to achieve a result, usually a political or social one: black/student activism” (p. 13). Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2003) defines activist as “someone who works hard doing practical things to achieve social or political change” (p. 16). Oxford Dictionary (1992) defines activist as “a person who works to achieve a political or social change, especially as a member of an organization with particular aims” (p. 15).

While dictionary definitions are similar to those in scholarly discourse, the meanings of ‘activism’ and ‘activist’ differ from one writer to another. Sleeter shows that in fragile states and more conservative societies a more common form of activism is giving voice to those who are silenced and oppressed (Sleeter (1996) Multicultural education as social activism). However, Blackburn indicates (Blackburn (2010) *Combating homophobia through teacher activism*) that in more modern societies today activists challenge attitudes such as homophobia and heterosexism to promote equal rights for all people. It can be argued from the comparison of the two studies that the problems and needs of fragile states such as Afghanistan are different from those of stable and developed countries such as the United States. Any form of activism around concepts such as heterosexism in Afghanistan, for instance, would create more chaos and

disorder in the country. One of the major reasons is that most people would not tolerate such forms of activism. However, while activism for the purpose of ‘giving voice to the voiceless’ can be risky for the activist, the risk would certainly not be as great as fighting against heterosexism. Therefore, activists must have a good understanding of the context before initiating any form of activism. Also, it can be learned from the two examples that activism must address the dire and important needs of the population. As the literature in the previous section suggests, this dire need for Afghanistan at present concerns civil society, including especially education.

My study was also informed by the work of Madison (2010) on the concept of activism and the forms it takes. Madison’s research work focused on the stories of resistance and struggles in Sub-Saharan Africa for human rights and social justice. His work illustrates how activism is constituted, and the dimensions of imagination and creativity within the work of the activists. Activists in Sub-Saharan Africa use performance as a tactic in their work for human rights and social justice; create a means and a space for activism from every element and very basic resources to resist the strategies of more powerful institutions and ideologies. Madison’s findings suggest that even in places where resources are very basic, underprivileged people could use simple acts of singing or group dancing to raise their voices for the cause they believe in. Madison finds that performance in the form of social gatherings, dances, street songs, and live shows for a particular goal can further the cause of human rights and be powerful enough to make an impact. In situations where oppressive regimes or ideologies use their power to maintain the status quo that is imposed on the oppressed, it is more effective for activists to use peaceful rather than aggressive approaches to fight for the change they wish to bring. Madison maintains that organised and purposeful activism of marginalised people is more effective when their activities are focused on

achieving what they want rather than resisting and opposing what they do not want. In other words, calls for justice and equality may speak louder than threatening the oppressor and criticising his injustices.

Another influence on my work has been Gitlin who argues (Gitlin (1994) *Power and method: political activism and educational research*).that to challenge norms and beliefs that have long been practised in an organisation or society, an activist would need courage to face the risks inherent in such a challenge. Challenging the traditional practices that people have practised for years and even decades will psychologically and emotionally disturb them thus causing them to react and resist. Gitlin explains the relationship between political and social activism and educational activism. He states that educational activism is directly linked to social and political activism. According to him schools could either act as agents of social change or they could promote the cause of the oppressor and help the continuation of the status quo. In the section below, I elaborate more on the concept of educational activism.

#### **2.4.1: Educational Activism**

Sleeter (1996) states that schools can be the site to fight for social change and human emancipation through engagement and participation of the oppressed with the oppressor. In the educational philosophies and theories I reviewed in books such as those by Freire (Freire, Paulo (1972) *Cultural action for freedom*) and Dewey (Dewey, John (1915) *The school and society*), there is great emphasis on the need for schools to act as agents of social change. These educational theorists argue that in order for the teachers and students to become agents of socio-economic and political reform, some form of activism is required.

Another author whose work I found insightful about schools as agents of social change is Verma (2010). She believes that the crucial importance of critical education is

to allow the teachers and students to ‘be the change’ and ‘act back’ in order to contribute towards promotion of human rights. In the example of critical maths in a school in Chicago, she vividly illustrates the connection of school subjects to social justice. Similarly her emphasis on praxis as a way to engage with the issues of community around school is an illustration of education for justice and human rights. It can be learned from Verma’s work that there is a direct connection between the liberation of education and human rights in educational activism.

Kumashiro is particularly informative on educational activism. (Kumashiro (2002) *Troubling education: Queer activism and an oppressive pedagogy*). She believes that schools create and develop students’ identities. Her argument is that as time passes and these identities are associated with particular attributes and repeated, things become natural and naturalised and most of the community accepts them. Activism needs to pave the way for the new, thus repetition of practices and policies that discriminate against others is not activism. In other words Kumashiro’s study suggests that in schools where repetition is dominant, more activism may be required as more may need to be changed and challenged, as she writes:

They work to repeat rather than to change social dynamics that privilege certain groups in society and marginalise others. They use power as it has traditionally been used to benefit some and limit the opportunities, threaten the safety, and subordinate the identities of others (p. 11).

Kumashiro’s argument is that schools can act as agencies where teachers and students discuss issues between minorities and dominant groups in a society. A strong connection between social activism and its relation to school is evident in her work. She believes that an anti-oppressive activist is an individual or a group of people who challenge the status quo in defence of the rights of the minorities, thus in an anti-oppressive pedagogy, teachers and students learn to become activists to challenge the status quo to promote equality and respect for the rights of minorities. According to her, educational activists

need to fight for an inclusive and multicultural curriculum that does not marginalise one group and privilege another. According to her, operation is not that which is merely produced by actions and intentions of individuals or through social structures but through discourse where students learn ways of thinking to privilege some and marginalise others.

My study on educational activism has been significantly informed by the writings of Giroux, specifically such works as: *Ideology, culture & the process of schooling*” (Giroux, 1981), *Theory and resistance in education: A pedagogy for the opposition* (Giroux, 1983), *Living dangerously: Multiculturalism and the politics of difference* (Giroux, 1993), and *Counternarratives: Cultural studies and critical pedagogies in postmodern spaces* (Giroux, 1996). In the following section I present a brief summary of the perspectives of Giroux on educational activism that served to inform my research.

Activism in the work of Giroux (1993) is presented as a set of organised actions grounded in civic courage; an essential component for activism to happen. He argues that the virtue of courage is a crucial component of activism. He maintains that without courage performing activism and fighting against the status quo would be very difficult or even impossible. Giroux has written extensively on issues that are related to activism. He asserts that in an educational context, because teachers dare to try new methods and new ways of engaging with their students, their initiatives put them at risk of losing their jobs because they do not perform based on what is expected of them. Such teachers are usually referred to as ‘teacher activists’ or teachers as ‘social activists’.

Giroux insists on the importance of teaching children the virtue of courage in schools. He reasons that courage enables students to question, critique, and engage in critical conversations with their teachers and classmates. An education system that is grounded on ethics of risk where those in the system are not afraid to question issues of

racism and the way social forms work, enables students to engage in activism. He believes that teachers are cultural workers in a democracy and their job is to minimise the oppression imposed upon them. He asserts that to teach children critical citizenship, education must move beyond the passive learning of specific rights and that it must involve active participation for transformation.

To Giroux pedagogy is a form of cultural work that involves production of knowledge and social identities. According to him, pedagogy as an act of resistance and transformation allows children to challenge concepts such as colonialism. In such pedagogy students and teachers are regarded as agents and not mere technicians. The perspectives of Giroux suggest that it is through teaching and acting of critical citizenship that activism can happen. Activism cannot happen as long as teachers and students are passive recipients of information and merely engaged in administrative and paper work.

Since most of the literature presented above suggests that it is the existence of some form of oppression that gives birth to activism, in the following section I examine the relation of activism and oppression to elaborate how this relation might inform educational activism.

#### **2.4.2: Activism and Oppression**

Kumashiro (2002) clarifies that activism exists because oppression exists. According to her regardless of the form of the oppression, what gives meaning to activism is oppression, meaning that activism stands against oppression or oppressive processes. Her argument about how the dissatisfaction of minorities can result in the creation of purposeful movements and activism against dominant groups can also be insightful for teacher activists. She emphasises in her works the need for anti-oppressive pedagogies that address the issues of minorities within the curriculum and everyday

teaching and learning. Her studies indicate that there are direct links between oppression and repetition of the status quo. She maintains that a dominant method and cycle of repetition in schools support the repetition of the overall status quo in the interests of the oppressor. Kumashiro's perspectives on the role of the marginalised resonate with the perspectives of Paulo Freire (1996) who states that it is the responsibility of the marginalised to challenge the stereotypical identity that the oppressors have created for them.

A common characteristic in the studies of Freire by Fontana (Fontana, 1993), Giroux (Giroux, 1993), and Verma (2010) is that educational activism to foster the role of schools to promote equality, social justice, and human rights is directly linked to oppression. Freire (1972) himself presents several reasons why it is the job of the oppressed and the marginalised to challenge and change the way of the oppressor. One reason he presents is that oppressing others to maintain and gain power is a process of dehumanising others; therefore the marginalised who fight for their humanity must not dehumanise others in return. Instead, the oppressed need to work for the humanisation and restoration of humanity of everyone. Second, given that the marginalised and the oppressed suffer and fall victim to the plots of the oppressors, they can better understand and experience the problems they are confronted with, and are more motivated to change oppression considering they are affected by it.

In their book on student activism (Sampson & Korn (1970) *Student activism and protest*) the authors illustrate their belief that mere awareness about the structure of operation and how it functions is not enough. They argue that for activists to change and challenge an oppressive process, activism needs to be action-oriented, organised, and purposeful. Sampson & Korn's perspectives resonate with the argument of Anderson and

Herr (2007) that the marginalised need to challenge the beliefs of the privileged about them so they can find their own voices through acts of activism for justice and fairness.

From this review, there appears to be two key aspects or characteristics of activists. One is that activists speak out for others, advocate for the rights of the marginalised, and attempt to be the voice of the voiceless or to give the marginalised a voice. Individuals and institutions that fight against dominant and oppressive ideologies or regimes and are engaged and active in anti-oppressive activities are referred to as activists.

The second common characteristic of such individuals and groups is their dissatisfaction with the status quo. Their discontent and dissatisfaction inspire action for change which usually involves risk. Study of activism also suggests that activism could be as large as a continual battle against an ideology, an oppressive system, or against a dominant and privileged race. An example of that is the activism aimed at ending apartheid and racial segregation in South Africa. It could also be a simple act of anger of a teacher, which sparks her courage to dare to oppose a school policy or norm and to challenge the status quo even if such activism would cause her to lose her job. The perspectives presented in this section of the literature review chapter also illustrate a strong relation between educational activism and socio-economic and political activism and how they interact. Educational activism in most studies is presented as a crucial tool to achieve social justice and human emancipation and rights in a society.

The qualities described in this section about activism resonate with the actions of the individuals chosen as participants of this study. These individuals seem to speak out for a cause greater than their own personal interests. Challenging the status quo and fighting for the new in the conflict-affected Afghan society is an indication of their willingness to take risks. The dissatisfaction of these individuals with the poor quality of



education and the passive role of Afghan schools, and their seemingly active engagement in trying to change it, constitute activism. In bringing forward the voices of the activists, this study seeks to situate this consideration of their activism within the existing Afghan local knowledge that could be considered as the ‘indigenous’ perspectives and philosophical orientations that inform education in Afghanistan.

## **2.5 Rumi: Persian Philosophy as Antecedents of Afghan Education**

In the following section I examine the perspective and philosophy of the 13<sup>th</sup> century mystic, Rumi. Of the several Persian mystics such as Sanai al-Ghaznawi, Avehina Balkhi, Jami, Ansari, and Nawai, Rumi’s work is the most translated in the Western world. Therefore, it is often more accessible to non-Afghans, while still representing traditional Afghan perspectives. I examine selected poems of Rumi as a local and intellectual worldview to seek what insights he offers to my study. Rumi had a profound impact in my life, and his poems have remained in the hearts and minds of many educated Afghans for centuries. Moreover, he is regarded as one of the greatest humanists born in Afghanistan.

My understanding of Rumi’s work in this section is based on the direct translation of his work from Persian into English by Western authors. I use the translated work of Nicholson (1925), Whinfield (1973), Sorkhabi (2009a), Arberry (1961) and Hommerding (2007). I use commentaries of Lewis (2008) on Rumi’s poems as well. I also use the Persian commentary books of Moahed (1969) and Balkhi (2009). All translations from the books of Moahed and Balkhi are mine.

Rumi’s work covers a variety of social and political spectrums, and activism is evident in his poetry. In several poems he criticises the totalitarian view of the religious extremists and the oppression of the masses by the kings in power. Rumi’s activism was a form of activism of the mind through poetry. He seems to try to raise awareness among

the masses of their ability to recognise their human potential, fight for their rights, and contribute towards a just world through love, respect, and empathy. Rumi put great emphasis on knowing oneself as a condition for the transformation of the world.

Rumi was a remarkable humanist, theologian and mystic in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. He was born in Balkh province of Afghanistan in 1207 and died in 1273 at Qunia, in Asiatic Turkey. In his best-known books “*Diwan-e-Kabir great poem*” collection and “*Mathnawi long poems*”, he addresses a set of common existential questions: What does it mean to be a human? What is the purpose of life? What does it mean to be educated? And what is the nature of truth? Moahed (1969) states in his introduction about Rumi, that the poet spent days and nights thinking about where he came from, what the purpose of his existence was and where he would end up. According to him, Rumi’s advice is that to answer these questions, one must educate the heart and not merely the mind. He maintains that Rumi’s educational endeavours to nourish his heart and soul, and his message of love turned him into an international figure and a spiritual guide for thousands of people around the world.

At an early age, Rumi challenged the traditional education of his time and the dominant voices of the religious dogmas. His father became his teacher, and in order to save him and his family from the massacres of the Moghul Empire and the religious dogmas, left Afghanistan for Turkey. Rumi, and his father Baha’uddin Valad, who was known as the king of scholars in Balkh, fled Balkh and headed for Rumi, a Turko-Persian town in today’s Asiatic Turkey, and so acquired the title “Rumi” from the name of that area. While Rumi and his family were on their way to Turkey, they came across Attar Nishaburi, a mystical poet. In his first encounter with Rumi trailing behind his father, Attar said, “there goes a river dragging an ocean behind it” (Moahed, 1969, p. 4). Moahed’s point aligns with the reflection of Hommerding (2007) stating:

When Attar saw the young Jalaluddin Rumi he was so impressed that he presented Rumi with a copy of 'Asrar Nameh' *The Book of Secrets* - a book Attar had composed during his own youth. He also told the boy's father: "Time will come when the fiery words of this boy will kindle the hearts of lovers all over the world." (p. 2).

R. A. Nicholson's translation helped me enormously to gain a comprehensive grasp of Rumi's philosophy of life and education. In introductory notes on Rumi, Nicholson (1925) states:

To those interested in the history of religion, morals, and culture, in fables and folklore, in divinity, philosophy, medicine, astrology, and other branches of mediaeval learning, in Eastern poetry and life and manners and human nature, the Mathnawi should not be a sealed book, even if it cannot always be an open one (p. xvii).

Rumi was inspired by the work of the 12<sup>th</sup> century mystics Sanai Ghaznawi and Attar Nishaburi. Moahed (2003) quotes from Rumi, "Attar was the soul and Sanai the eyes of mysticism and I come after them" (p. 4). Sanai of Afghanistan and Attar of Iran, two popular mystical Persian poets, shared a similar worldview as Rumi. However, Rumi's work, though informed by the work of Sanai and Attar, became more popular in both the East and West.

For a number of years, Rumi was a theologian and preacher until he met Shamsi-Tabrizi. Nicholson mentions in his introductory notes that Shamsi was "the perfect image of the Divine Beloved which he *Rumi* had long been seeking" (p. 19).

It is crucial to mention that Rumi was a highly spiritual man whose purpose in life was unity with the Divine (God). This spirituality is illustrated in most of his couplets and tales. Nicholson (1950) notes that Rumi's master work Mathnawi starts with a poem, "Listen to the reed how it tells a tale, complaining of separations - saying, ever since I was parted from the reed-bed, my lament hath caused man and woman to moan" (p. 5). In another place Rumi compares himself to a reed that is separated from a reed-bed who wishes to be back united with it. In another poem he states, "We are the flute,

and the music in us is from thee; we are as the mountain, and the echo in us is from thee” (p. 35). Rumi explains how God’s beauties are manifested through human beings and that his desire is to unite with that source of beauty.

Hundreds of Rumi’s poems, however, are about worldly matters and around the crucial importance of critical consciousness. They include the concept of critical thinking and what critical thinking means in relation to being fully human. His tales are mostly around concepts of social justice, respect for diversity, unity, healthy relationships, love, compassion, and freedom.

The terms ‘activism’ or ‘activist’ do not exist in Rumi’s work as his books were written more than eight centuries ago. Therefore, I sought the stories and poems that illustrate examples of ‘activism’ where a person supports or opposes a controversial matter and takes sides in relation to social and political issues. Courage, compassion, knowledge, creativity, and service are some of the virtues and qualities that, according to Rumi, men and women need to possess to make a difference and touch people’s lives on earth. To him a knowledgeable man of wisdom and sincerity devotes himself to a good cause. Rumi’s perspective on activism could be argued to be that mankind must free itself from the prison of self and fight the demon inside first before it can work towards freedom for others. How Rumi’s work relates to the Divine or the existential perfection of God has been significantly misunderstood and misinterpreted in education in Afghanistan where teachers take his words as having everything to do with the relationship between man and the creator. However, in most of the stories in Mathnawi, Rumi emphasises the practical application of the virtues of compassion, love, service, and friendship among people. I learned from my readings that Rumi’s divine love was not by any means disconnected from his love of people, vividly illustrated in his biographies by Western and Eastern authors.

Another aspect of Rumi that brings us closer to the concept of activism is his perspectives on innovation, renewing, and creativity. These perspectives are illustrated in various poems where he emphasises that education and knowledge enable children to become more innovative and creative people and to try new things. In one poem quoted by (Moahed, 2003). Rumi states; “say something fresh and new so you can renew and refresh both worlds. And as you try the new, make it go beyond the two worlds and make it eternal. The time of the old sellers and old goods is gone. We are the new sellers and this world is our market” (p. 121). To create the new, one must penetrate the old, which requires risk and sacrifice to achieve that. This resonates with the qualities that make one an activist. It is also apparent that Rumi was against repetition, and to him learning was a momentum that continually created the new and challenged ‘the market of the old sellers’. Though he had his own followers and students, many conservative religious Muslims in Afghanistan rejected him for his liberal thoughts. His life reveals the difficulties he went through to pursue his path of love and humanity. It can be argued that his courage in pursuing his desires and his beliefs, which in many cases were against the status quo and contrary to what was accepted as religion in Afghanistan, made Rumi a humanist activist.

It is evident that at the core of his teaching is the idea that if human beings embrace love and fully submit to it, love eliminates fear, which Rumi describes as a source of human misery. Rumi insists that as education for the mind stimulates imagination in shaping beliefs and values, education for the heart fills the human soul with love for itself and for the world. In the paragraphs below, I briefly examine Rumi’s concept of education for the heart.

### **2.5.1: Educating the Heart: Virtue of love**

Balkhi (2009) writes in his introductory commentary that the thirst for meaning, kind-heartedness, joy, love, compassion, and tranquillity are what Rumi's work focuses on. While educating the mind is of great significance, Rumi emphasised the necessity of education for the heart in the humanisation of mankind. In one of his poems, Rumi says "I am a farmer of the heart, " (p. 223). Education for the heart is centred on the search for the Truth; the Truth of existence, reason for being, and what it means to be fully human. Education for the heart is the spontaneous love for the light and to realise inner peace, love, bliss, and energy. Rumi clearly articulated that education for the heart is for creating a spiritual dialogue among people ingrained in love, care, and generosity. Hommerding (2007) says, "the heart, which appears over and over in Rumi's poetry, is like a shining sun, a green garden of sacred secrets, a boundless desert or an ocean without shores, which Rumi finds to be his true home and the source of his poetry" (p. 4).

Moahed (2003) argues that Rumi emphasised the necessity of educating the mind as well as the heart. He quotes him stating, "O mankind, you are all thoughts and other than that just flesh and bones" (p. 18). According to him, Rumi firmly believed that what humanises man is the heart and not the head. He reasoned that the mind can receive both good and evil education while the heart can either remain uneducated, in which case it is a mere pumping organ, or it receives and constructs only the knowledge that manifests the true nature of human beings and produces love and compassion. According to Rumi, educating the heart heals the soul and the spirit of a human being. Love starts by the love and respect for the self through breaking the chains of one's imprisonment. According to Rumi we cannot love others if we do not love ourselves. Moahed argues that the integration of Rumi's philosophy of love into the students' learning process has the

potential to develop students' wisdom and knowledge, enabling them to be more engaged with the world as human beings.

These scholars all argue that for Rumi, love was not abstract; neither was it egoistical. Love was alive and a living experience. His cosmic paradigm was that love was the very medium of existence, thus he referred to God as a source of love, 'the beloved'. He saw the exercise of love as a journey that would link him to the Divine. Hommerding (2007) asserts:

"In Rumi's vision, the expressions 'God is Love' and 'Love Thy Neighbour' either go together or go nowhere. From his biographical records, we read many tales of Rumi's compassion and humbleness towards people whoever they were" (p. 4).

Moahed's (2003) commentary on a poem by Rumi about love is that the practice of loving and being loved and the union with the Divine do not mean isolation from people or the world. Rumi's perspective is that union with the Divine is reached through honest service to the community and through good deeds. Moahed notes that Rumi emphasises the value of unity with people and quotes him as stating, "my religion is love and every heart is my temple" (p. 170). Rumi believes that man should search for the divine in the hearts of the people. His message is that the purpose of life on earth is not a preparation for an afterlife but rather a beginning of a journey, a quest for unity with the Divine. The gateway to reach that unity is through acts of love and service throughout life.

Moahed further argues that Rumi's love of others is unconditional and so is his generosity to others. He loves humans regardless of their race, colour, nationality or religion. 'Unconditional' also means that he does not expect a favour in return when he serves, a principle that he describes as the way of life for darvishes (devotees of Sufi

mysticism). Rumi's philosophy is that generosity is helping others without any expectations in return. Generosity is unconditional giving according to him.

To Rumi, generosity is not just material giving but a spiritual giving, a giving of love and care to all human kind without any discrimination. For example, Sorkhabi (2009a) indicates this theme in the poems of Rumi saying,

These meanings are not always little capsules of knowledge. Sometimes they have to do with bolstering one's sense of confidence. It is impossible to imagine Rumi was moping. It's not his style, and he does not want it to be ours (p. xi).

From these scholars' translations and interpretations of Rumi we can understand that the practice of the virtues of love, care, and compassion were his way of life and not a mere preparation for unity with the Divine. In different tales, Rumi emphasises the awareness of human beings of their values and the practice of those values in daily life. Mere awareness of our individual and social values and principles is not enough to live a fruitful life. Rumi's philosophy of love is that love has no conditions and that it is only through giving that it becomes a part of the human and his every day practices in relation to others and to the world. In regard to this sense of humanness, Balkhi (2009) quotes Rumi as saying,

The religion of love is separate from all forms of religions. Lovers are of one nation and one religion (p. 241).

### **2.5.2: Insights from Rumi into the Current Educational Considerations**

The above consideration of scholarly interpretations of Rumi's poetry has shed light on key aspects of Rumi's philosophy for life and living. The commentaries that now follow in this section are based on my own readings of Rumi's work in my native language Persian from his original Persian books. I focus on using Rumi's work as a philosophical lens and local worldview, which could be considered here as indigenous knowledge, for examining what they offer to contemporary education. Given that the



time Rumi wrote, he chose ‘man’ to refer to people, I choose to use either ‘people’ or use the analogy of ‘man’ as both man and woman.

At the centre of Rumi’s teaching is for people to educate themselves about who they are and who they become as a result of their educational endeavours. He describes life as an exercise of human values until the practice of these values become one’s very way of life. Rumi’s philosophy suggests that education can help mankind awaken to the eternal energy and eternal love within. He reminds us that discovering the inner potential is a process of constant learning. Rumi believes in the necessity of living by our human principles and values, otherwise the knowledge gained is of little or no value. He insists that caring about others and being generous to others is part of being a human, but that the mere knowledge of this is not enough and that one must practise it.

The study of Rumi’s life suggests that educating the heart is a difficult and time-consuming task which requires devotion and firm commitment. In several poems Rumi avers that human nature and essence is good at the time of birth and that it is the type of education and the environment in which people grow that humanises or dehumanises them. He remarks that it is the environment and social relations that affect man’s attitude towards himself and towards the world, as well as how he makes meaning of the two. Rumi teaches that education for the heart is not only designed to restore the good in human nature, but also to grow it and nourish it through learning to love and to be loved.

Reading Rumi’s love poems, my understanding is that he explicitly maintains that even the desire for unity with the Divine (God) cannot be achieved directly unless one’s actions are rooted in justice, love, care, and compassion towards other beings. According to him one must become a person of good character rooted in the practice of universal human values and principles, to take the journey of becoming more fully human and so to unite with the Divine. He reminds us that love for humanity without any

discrimination, and the way people relate to the world and to others, need to be at the core of education. However, it is evident in his philosophy that this goal cannot be achieved through mechanical education or the kind of education that favours one over another. Incorporating Rumi's philosophy, therefore, requires a shift in the Afghan schools from a focus on what students become as a result of their learning, to who they become as human beings and citizens of the world. This means teaching would be centred more on developing character than on training for a career.

Moral education is also highlighted in Rumi's writings. His tales explicitly point out how acts of anger, greed, egotism, feelings of inferiority, and jealousy take a person away from his/her essential nature, and how acts of loving, caring, giving, respect, and humility bring people closer to their very true nature. Rumi's tales about the kings and their way of ruling the nation explain the difference between a just and unjust society, and the brutal and bitter consequences of injustices. Teachers' attempts to engage students in a discussion of what Rumi is trying to convey through the tales he shares might create an environment where critical thinking and critical consciousness happen. If critical thinking doesn't happen, students may not be able to see, understand, feel, and do anything to promote social justice and equality in their classrooms, homes, and neighbourhood. Not only are very few of Rumi's tales included in Afghan school textbooks, but also they are written in a very poetic form with little or no elaboration so that children find them hard to understand or to relate to.

In sum, Rumi believes that knowledge is power. He argues in his poem 'Knowledge is Power' that this power can be good or it can be evil. If knowledge purifies, promotes love and compassion for self and for others, that kind of knowledge is good. If education results in greed envy, resentment, anger and inferiority, then it causes harm to the self and others. Rumi's philosophy has the potential to offer significant

insights into integrating love and soul into the educational curriculum. Based on Rumi philosophy, a balance is needed in educating the hearts and minds of students and recognising the spiritual value of life as well as the material. Through the practice of love, teachers help students realise their inner peace, love and power, and to maintain a balance between the outer and the inner world, so they can live happier, healthier, and more fully human lives. The integration of Rumi's philosophy of love into students' learning requires a soulful curriculum that recognises the significance of the spiritual life of students. The purpose of teaching and learning in such a curriculum is for students to discover their inner world, to nourish their heart and soul, and to fully live in the essence of human spirit by loving and being loved.

## **2.6. Philosophies of Western Thinkers that Inform Current Educational Issues in Afghanistan**

Because of the four decades of war, little has been done in advancing contemporary education in Afghanistan, and most of the educational theories and practices are highly traditional. This generally results in the passive nature of teachers, students, and schools. For example, content coverage and memorisation are the predominant methods of everyday teaching and learning in Afghan schools (Habibyar, 2009). Given this general lack of contemporary Afghan philosophical scholarship, in this section I examine the perspectives of some key Western philosophers and educationalists to understand how they can inform current issues of Afghan education and the findings from this study. I chose the work of Paulo Freire, John Dewey, and a number of other Western thinkers whose philosophies resonate with that of Rumi about the role of education in humanising societies. In this way I am able to connect traditional, indigenous Afghan perspectives with Western educational thought. I found Freire's

philosophies to be more aligned with the work of Rumi on the role of education in humanising individuals and societies.

### **2.6.1: Paulo Freire: Education for Liberation**

Paulo Freire was a former Secretary of Education in Brazil, where he was born in 1921 in the city of Recife. Freire lived his childhood in poverty and later developed great concern for the poor. He dedicated his life to bring the gap between the rich and the poor social classes closer through education and awareness.

Freire places emphasis on teachers playing the role of students and students playing the role of teachers, who together think, critique and reflect on each other's role. To do this teachers and students must be engaged in critical dialogue and actively integrated in knowledge construction (Freire, 1972). However, he reminds us that the teacher-student relationship is one of domination when the teacher is regarded as the only source of information, and the students adapt to the worldview and interpretations of the teacher about the subject matter they are taught. In other words, when critical dialogue is missing inside a classroom, the teacher might impose the wants of the dominators on students regardless of the relevance to students' lives of what is taught.

Commenting on Freire's work, O'Shea, O'Brien, and Maeve (2011) note that he opposes the use of education as a way to dominate others, and considers education itself as a political act expressing a political will, and usually the will of what he refers to as 'the elites'. According to them Freire argues that the way education is defined by the elite is not the right definition. They maintain that Freire reasons that under the elite's domination school is a mechanism of domination and cultural invasion. Freire himself describes the dominating attitude of the oppressors to preserve the status quo by feeding myths to the nation they rule (Freire (1996) *Pedagogy of the oppressed*).

One of the key concepts in the consideration of the scholarship and literature on education that I reviewed regarding Freire's philosophy is the relationship of the oppressor and the oppressed in education. Perry's (2000) interpretation of Freire's argument is that within 'an oppressive society' the oppressor social class oppresses and the oppressed social class is oppressed meaning that the status quo is imposed upon the oppressed. Freire's philosophy suggests the oppressed have to struggle against the oppressor in order to realise their humanity which the oppressor has denied (Freire & Macedo, 1996). Freire insists that only the oppressed can liberate the humanity of all; both that of the oppressors and the oppressed.

According to Fontana (1993), Freire argues that the ideological conditions in the education system are put in place for the purpose of the maintenance and reproduction of the capitalist system, and the creation of a labour force that passively complies with the dictates of the dominant powers and institutions. The oppressive forces intentionally design educational curriculums that keep students and teachers passive.

### **2.6.2: Praxis and Humanising Education**

In this section I present the commentaries of Smith (2008), Gadotti (1996), O'Shea (2011), Phifer (2002), and Darder (2002b) on the theories of Paulo Freire on praxis.

The philosophy of praxis in the work of Paulo Freire could be interpreted as bringing theory and practice together inside the classroom. Darder (2002b) draws on Freire stating that praxis allows students and teachers to construct knowledge together through critical dialogue and practical experiences. Freire (1996) reminds us that praxis is opposite of what he calls "the banking system" where students receive, memorise, and repeat, and the teacher deposits information into students. The banking system does not allow dialogue between the teacher and the students since no critical thinking and critical

consciousness are involved. While the purpose of the use of praxis is integration of students in creating knowledge, in a banking system students have a passive role and adapt to the world-view of the teacher.

When students are integrated rather than adaptive, engaged rather than passive, and in critical dialogue with the teacher, praxis happens. Freirean philosophy on the teacher being the student and the student being a teacher is a model of bringing praxis inside the classroom. Freire believes that collaboration between the teacher and students and among students themselves in constructing knowledge enables all students to attain their full potential as human beings. Freire articulates that praxis is not merely theoretical but practical; perceiving and acting upon the world. He emphasises the significance of action and reflection going together. For Freire, praxis means reflection and action upon the world so that the masses transform it collectively.

Freire believes that praxis promotes creativity and stimulates action and reflection. What goes on inside the classroom between the teacher and students and among students themselves should happen in connection with the values the teacher and students bring in with themselves. Through willingness to work with love, unity, compassion and commitment, a fundamental and lasting change to the education of the children could be realised (Freire, 1996). Freire clarifies that by integration the goal is not to integrate children into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they could become beings for themselves (Freire, 1996). Transformation happens when the school culture and the education administration allow teachers and students to think for themselves and to critique issues and events that surround them.

Freire (1996) proposes that for integration to happen, collective collaboration of individuals in a society is necessary. He advocates that humanity does not happen in isolation and people impact on each other's lives on a daily basis, thus a person needs to

be aware of the impact he or she makes in the world. He maintains that in the context of schools, the students must learn how to relate to one another inside the classroom and beyond. Similarly, for people to perform their civic and citizenship responsibilities effectively, they must work together and learn to build stronger and healthier human relationships. Freire reminds us that “to be human is to engage in relationship with others and with the world” (p. 3). Thus it can be argued that students, classrooms, school culture, teachers, and the world outside the school cannot function in isolation.

Freirean theories suggest that the use of his philosophy of praxis in teaching and learning can improve students’ engagement, productivity, and reflection inside the classroom. By using the philosophy of praxis teachers can bring experience of public and civic projects and activities, inside the classroom. Freire (1996) believes that “to be human is to engage in relationship with others and with the world” (p. 3). It can be argued that praxis for the purpose of integration and engagement equips schools to consistently contribute towards public engagement and participation in a growing democracy rather than simply informing students of their rights and responsibilities.

For Freire praxis is bringing the experience inside classrooms where students can learn, act, and reflect on their work, rethink, and act again. He suggests engaging community members, including students, in projects of service to the community. Senior students inside a classroom, he says, can tutor the younger students on their projects. In other words, praxis is bringing the realities of society inside classrooms in order to critique them and to try to find solutions for problems and challenges that the communities around their schools face.

Elias’s (1994) understanding of Freire’s theory of praxis is that praxis can be a significant move for liberating schools’ content and pedagogy so that schools can contribute towards peace and stability. According to Elias, learning for Freire is the

process by which one moves from one level of consciousness to another (p. 128). He points out that for Paulo Freire one purpose of education is to improve students' critical consciousness, which he believes is possible through praxis. Every individual has the potential and ability to make a difference, and the essence of making a difference is through both intellectualism and experience. Besley and Peters' (2012) interpretation of Freire's philosophy resonates with the work of Elias stating that Freire's concept of praxis is that responsibility cannot be acquired intellectually, but only through experience. Praxis is a recommended method that focuses on the lived experience and reflection of students' everyday life while a dominant method mostly focuses on content transformation and content memorisation. 00

### **2.6.3: Dialogue in Praxis**

In his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Freire emphasises the significance of dialogue arguing that “founding itself upon love, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence” (p. 72). He maintains that in an atmosphere where one person (the teacher) is seen as the only person who has the truth, dialogue hardly happens. Freire insists that “dialogue further requires an intense faith in humankind, faith in their power to make and remake, to create and re-create, faith in their vocation to be more fully human” (p. 71). Freire considers education as a political act. However, he insists that if this political act expresses the political will of the elites only and is dominated by the world view of the oppressors, it will allow no dialogue. He further states that liberation of education from the political domain of the elites requires action to go with theory. He reminds us that dialogue is most effective when it takes everyone into account. Dialogue is purposeful, engaging, and critical when it is on issues that tend to affect more than the speaker and the listener and is for the wellbeing of others.



For Freire, dialogue is not mere conversation or discussion inside a classroom but the co-construction of knowledge. He insists on the necessity for dialogue between teacher and students in order for students to be engaged in developing critical consciousness, which may result from their intervention in the world as transformers.

According to Freire dialogue can be an effective way to liberate teaching and learning from mere memorisation and content coverage. He insists that dialogue allows teachers and students to construct knowledge together. Dialogue helps students develop their engaged critical consciousness and confidence in not only building their world-view through critical analysis, but also transforming the world in which they live. Dialogue finds its meaning when teachers and students discuss, reflect, and act on issues discussed inside the classroom. Freire reminds us that engaged critical consciousness results in students' intervention with the world as transformers. Dialogue changes the passive role of students encouraging them to engage the community of students inside the classrooms where they not only construct and critique the content knowledge but also experience it in the form of praxis in everyday life. Freire's argument is that in dialogue, students and teachers are involved in action inside their classrooms, reflect on each other's work, and as a result construct new actions that result from the discussions, critiques, agreements, disagreements, and new thoughts and ideas. When students see themselves as contributors and transformers, it is more likely that they will build confidence in becoming citizens who transform their communities and the world.

The notion of dialogue is also evident in the work of John Dewey. Dewey's school of thought is that of pragmatism, considering thought as an instrument or tool for prediction, problem-solving, and action (Stroud, 2011). John Dewey's progressivism (Dewey, 1925) is a philosophy that emphasises the significance of students' experiences inside classrooms and the relationship of the lessons learned to the real life of students

outside school. He argues that by bringing experience inside the classrooms, teachers and students discuss the effects of the events in the community on students' lives, and critique how students can respond to these events more effectively and positively. This interaction between teachers and students will allow teachers to raise their awareness of the socio-cultural, political, and economic conditions of the community in which the students live and to address the needs of the community accordingly, thereby encouraging the development of a socially and politically just and democratic society. This is why Dewey (1963) encourages schools to engage in projects of service to the community by bringing real-life experiences into the classrooms. He suggests that senior students tutor younger students inside a classroom, and students and teachers engage in critical dialogue.

Dewey (1963) emphasises that citizenship education is most effective when public engagement and participation is most visible in a society. He suggests that teachers assign small public-service projects to students, and dialogue with one another inside the classroom. Such engagement will give students a sense of identity as citizens and will likely awaken the learners' ability to think critically and creatively. Consistency in practice and experience of citizenship inside schools makes students loyal to their identity as citizens later when they are ready to make a greater difference beyond the school walls. Loyalty strengthens students' faith and belief in themselves and the practice of what is expected of them as citizens. Dewey insists that "since the young at a given time will at some later date compose the society of that period, the latter's nature will largely turn upon the direction children's activities were given at an earlier period" (2011, p. 26).

It can be learned from the perspectives of Freire and Dewey that dialogue ingrained in action and reflection is an essential component of active and effective learning.

#### **2.6.4: Critical Pedagogy**

Drawing on the work of Friere, Darder (Darder, 2002b) argues that critical pedagogy is engaged with compassion; a transcendence of the emotional and intellectual and how the heart and mind learn to see and know in new ways. Freirean theories suggest that critical pedagogy requires liberation of the mind, the courage to act, and the confidence to connect autonomy, energy, and alliance for social change. As he notes, Freirean theories suggest that individuals interested in education must have a good understanding of how the dominant culture works within education and how it excludes or includes different social classes. In accordance with Freirean philosophies, one purpose for critical pedagogy is for students to participate in critical dialogue and rational reasoning with their teachers and classmates about everyday issues and events that affect their lives at home and in the community. Freire states, “our traditional curriculum, disconnected from life, centred on words emptied of the reality they are meant to represent, lacking in concrete activity, could never develop a critical consciousness”(Darder, 2002b, p. 33).

Darder’s (2002a) understanding of Freire’s philosophy is that teaching, as a continuous practice, requires teachers to redefine themselves and their positions constantly. As the needs of the students and community continually change, teachers are required to address these changes in students’ lives. Therefore, liberation of pedagogy also means freeing the school curriculum from the unnecessary administration as well as the pre-determined procedures those teachers are expected to work with. Liberation of pedagogy helps students become socially conscious and politically and socially active. Darder argues that for Freire, liberation of pedagogy is not just about the integration of students into the structure and decision making, but also ensuring they understand how

the education they gain is related to their needs and to the needs of the community they live in and how education helps them be agents of social and political reform.

The concept of critical pedagogy is discussed in relation to the quality of critical dialogue between teachers and students, school and community, parents and teachers. Darder furthermore argues that critical pedagogy incorporates a holistic approach to education for creating a democratic, humanising, and non-hegemonic atmosphere inside the classroom. Educational philosophers emphasise the relation between school and community and mainly the teacher-parent relationship. Darder suggests that parents are the first educators of their children and thus can be involved in decision making with the school regarding the learning process of their children. She maintains that being a part of a larger social context, schools are expected to know about the needs of the community and feel the obligation to be agents of reforms in the community. In other words, critical pedagogy allows schools to serve a larger social purpose (social order and justice) rather than the wants of the elites. Darder emphasises that in order for critical dialogues to be effective, parents need to know what goes on in school. “Parents are a child’s most important teachers” (Darder, 2002a, p. 158). She urges that for teachers to become agents of change, a continual dialogue between the teachers and the parents is a necessity.

#### **2.6.5: Social Reconstruction**

Stanley’s (1992), arguments suggest that schools can be agents of reform if they address the social needs of students. He believes that for the curriculum to address children’s needs, curriculum developers need to have a clear understanding of children’s socio-economic living conditions. He suggests that an open-ended curriculum which is design-based on the reality of the community can serve students more effectively. This will enable socialisation of young people into their communities, which is similar to his argument that socialisation is one of the key purposes of education. Socialisation means

children gain the courage to have their say and learn to respectfully critique beliefs that are different from theirs and to critique their own relationships with others. Socialisation also means students learn to have the courage to communicate with their teachers and the school staff without fear or feelings of inferiority.

In order for education to help children socialise, teachers need to act as agents of social reform. Students learn how to communicate with one another and build a strong relationship with themselves and the world around them. A child-centred curriculum according to Stanley (1992) is where all educational efforts are made to address the educational needs of the children. He insists that education can and should be employed to solve social problems. He maintains that education can bring social order in a society, and teachers should be the architects of the new social order. He emphasises that social change is inevitable and can be directed by co-operating groups in a society which include teachers. Schools can play an integral role in improving the individual and social lives of the people in a community by pushing them towards democratic collectivism. Similarly, Freire emphasises education for civic formation and civic order. O'Shea and O'Brien (2011) draw on Freire stating that he believes that "to learn citizenship, one needs to experience it at a deep level of involvement and participation" (p. 81).

In sum, the perspectives of the selected Western educationalists and theorists presented in this section mainly reflect their thoughts about everyday learning of students, student-teacher relationships, and school-community relationships. It can be learned from these perspectives that in order for Afghan schools to become agents of social change and contribute towards peace, stability and a better economy, everyday practices of teaching and learning need to change. Activism is most effective when the activists are aware of what makes schools agents of social change. Activists' knowledge of everyday learning and teaching practices as well as their knowledge of contemporary

education can contribute towards the effectiveness of their work in educational activism. The summary presented also emphasises the importance of engagement of local communities with schools and the critical significance of hearing the voice of the locals in enhancing the impact of schools.

## **2.7: Conclusion**

In this chapter, I presented a summary of the selected literature on the current status and issues in Afghan education. The literature presented suggests that while great progress has been made post Taliban, the quality of education has remained poor. Teachers encounter extreme socio-economic challenges and the school-community relationship has remained passive. The international aid system has mostly failed to change the lives of teachers and the quality of learning. External aid has also contributed to the expansion of corruption in the Afghan government system. While some of the research in this area has reflected the voices of the local Afghans, many other players in the field, including international donors, the Afghan Ministry of Education, and the UN, have mostly neglected to reflect these voices.

The examination of the history of Afghan education shows that great lessons can be learned from the models that the kings as early leaders of modern Afghanistan used previously. For example, one of those models was the nomad schools where education addressed the needs and wants of the people based on their unique contexts. More importantly, the review of the history of education during the rule of the kings promises hope that reform is possible for Afghanistan. Rumi's philosophy is presented as an antecedent to that modern era, and provides invaluable insights about the existing local potential and knowledge that could be used for promoting quality of education, equality, peace, and democracy. Examination of the terms 'activism' and 'activist' in the context of education helps significantly in understanding what activism consists of, why activists

exist, and what qualities activists possess. Lastly, the selected contemporary educational concepts from the perspective of educationalist and philosopher Paulo Freire supported by the arguments of prominent Western thinker John Dewey contribute to the understanding of activism inside classrooms and schools. These perspectives also contribute to an understanding of why activism is necessary for transformation from a passive to an engaged curriculum that could shape schools to become agents of social change.

The lessons learned in this chapter articulate the importance of activism in education, types of activism, and why the voices of the activists matter. In the examples elaborated in the literature, it is evident that the voices of the locals are crucial through the process of reform and transition to transformation. However, the voices of the local Afghan educational activists have mainly been neglected. Therefore, this study focuses on bringing forward their voices and examining their thoughts and perspectives towards the future of Afghan education.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodological approach**

#### **3.1: Introduction**

The overall purpose of this research was to bring forward the voices of educational activists in Afghanistan to understand their thoughts, perspectives, and concerns about education. This chapter describes the methodological approach I have taken in addressing the research aim and questions.

The choice of the methodology is not only based on its appropriateness in addressing my research questions but also because it resonates with my knowledge of the context and my own paradigm or understanding of the world. A paradigm needs to be clearly articulated in a research project to create a more transparent space for dialogue. The way I view the world creates my epistemological position (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) as a researcher. My epistemological position affects my choice of methodology. Social constructivist perspectives are the multiple ways that people make meaning of the world, and the multiple ways that they give meaning to their experiences (Palincsar, 1998). My epistemological position aligns with that of social constructivism (D. D. V. Fisher, 1991) which contributed to my choice of narrative inquiry as my methodological approach and as a means of communication with my participants and collection of participants' stories of activism. Narrative inquiry provides an opportunity for individuals and groups to share their stories and express their thoughts, perspectives, and beliefs about a phenomenon (Clandinin, 2013).

A key criterion that I considered in my selection of participants was the high level of engagement of these individuals with society through education. To explore this criterion, I reviewed more than 100 Facebook pages, blogs, and newspapers in which



education was a concern. I also communicated with my former university students and colleagues in Herat city as well as school teachers to learn about the people most engaged in activism and public discourse concerning education. I identified a group of people who were the most outspoken and seemed to care more about education and society. They posted more about education on their blogs and other social pages such as Facebook than other Afghans. What distinguishes these people from other local Afghans is that these individuals constantly blog, appear on TV programmes, organise events, write about education on Facebook, and challenge the status quo in their own ways.

Relying on my own previous experience and context knowledge as an educator in Herat, I selected from the group of individuals that I identified 10 people who were most active in education with a motivation to transform it and change the status quo. Because of the proactive approaches of these individuals, their engagement with education, their motivation for change and their courage to speak up, I refer to them as local educational activists. Susan Groundwater-Smith & Judyth Sachs (2002) define an activist as someone who is “concerned to reduce or eliminate exploitation, inequality and oppression” (p. 352). The narratives of the participants presented in this thesis articulate that they had similar concerns. Also, the definition of an activist as “someone who works hard doing practical things to achieve social or political change” (*Longman dictionary of contemporary English*, p. 16) resonates with each of these individuals. Similarly the Oxford dictionary (1992) definition of an activist as “a person who works to achieve a political or social change, especially as a member of an organization with particular aims” (p. 15) applies to these individuals, and influenced my decision to choose them for my research.

### **3.2: Research Purpose and Questions**

In articulating the voices of Afghan educational activists that have been missing from the educational literature for the past four decades of war in Afghanistan, this research addresses the following questions based on their accounts.

1. What was the nature of the participants' educational experience and how have their experiences affected their perspectives on education and activism?
2. What are the thoughts and perspectives of the participants about the current education system and what reforms they wish to bring in the future?
3. What do their perspectives mean for the larger population of Afghanistan?

### **3.3: Design**

Data from this research project come from participants' interviews, observations, documents, and field notes conducted through the use of narrative inquiry in Herat, Afghanistan. I travelled twice to Herat for data collection, each time staying around two months. I communicated with participants through the virtual world for the past year and half. During this time I not only learned much about their lives but also became a part of their overall living stories. Throughout the research I acted as a social constructivist concerned and engaged with education in Afghanistan and the stories of the participants. In this capacity I positioned myself as an advocate for education in communicating with my participants. I explain the overarching methodological approach, summary of the research time, and outline key activities that I undertook in the research.

### **3.4: Methodology**

To achieve my aim of articulating the voices of the educational activists, I attempted to not only know the participants and make sense of their stories but also to study their stories in the context they were developed. My choice of a qualitative methodological approach epistemologically aligns with my aim.

A qualitative methodology allows a descriptive nature. Qualitative methods allow for the field notes, interview transcripts, audios, memos, documents and other official records to become rich research data (Biklen & Bogdan, 2007a). As Creswell (2009) states, “the goal of the researcher in qualitative research is to rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation being studied”(p. 8). This reflects the primary aim of this research bringing forward the voices of the activists. The underlying basis in the stories I examined was not merely a description of the character, plot, theme, and space (Clandinin, 2013) but also the response of the participant and the view of the participant in relation to the plot, theme, and space.

### **3.5: About the Participants**

In this research I interviewed 10 local educational activists comprising teachers, parents, poets, and public intellectuals. The activists I chose to call ‘public intellectuals’ are well educated locals who usually informally mediate between their communities and the governmental and private institutions. For example, they try to take the concerns of the communities in to the schools to discuss with teachers and authorities and vice versa. Although this is not a common culture throughout Afghanistan and few people are engaged with such activities, the activist participants of this study (public intellectuals) aim to signal possibilities for bringing communities and institutions such as schools closer to each other and to encourage people to engage more with schools. A significant role of the public intellectuals as is evident in the stories of Baba, Saboor, Farid and Omid (who are introduced in the table below) is to raise awareness of the masses about government policies and how they might affect people. The argument of these activists in their social blogs, interviews in the media, or in their writings is that the current education system does not have the capacity to promote peace, social justice, equality and an organic democracy in Afghanistan. This ‘critical view’ of education was one

criterion in the selection of the participants. Another criterion for their selection was that they spoke out, fought for change, and risked their lives to be the voice of others. In this research participants shared stories that reflected their views about education drawn from their educational experiences and their current engagement in education. Table 1 presents a biographical sketch of the participants: The names presented in this table are pseudonyms.

**Table 1: A biographical sketch of the participants**

Participant	Age	Gender	Position	Description
<b>Baba</b>	72	Male	Teacher and lecturer	Baba, a senior teacher activist, received his primary and secondary education as a shepherd during the reign of King Zahir Khan in the progressive decade of the 1960s, and his tertiary education when Afghanistan was at the peak of progress and development in the 1970s. Baba shares contrasting stories about education before the war and during the civil war and war on terrorism.
<b>Hayedah</b>	26	Female	Teacher and author of children's books	Hayedah, a teacher activist, received her primary education in Iran as a refugee, and shares experiences of her life under the Taliban regime and education post Taliban. Hayedah's stories illustrate Afghan women's struggle and resistance for the purpose of getting an education.
<b>Farid</b>	36	Male	Writer, satirist, and journalist	Farid is a secular public intellectual activist who contributes crucial theoretical knowledge to the stories of other participants. He shares stories of his educational experiences during the pro-communist, Mujahidin, and Taliban regimes. The contrast in the experiences provides significantly valuable insights into understanding the hegemonic forces that influence education in Afghanistan, and the desire for liberation.
<b>Khadij</b>	33	Female	Teacher	Khadij, a teacher activist, shares stories about her everyday teaching experiences within private and public schools. She illustrates the social life of teachers and the role of teachers in today's education in Afghanistan. Her story highlights the difficulties of female teachers in Afghanistan and the nature of male-oriented culture and its impact on women.

<b>Omid</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Poet, prosecutor</b>	Omid, a poet and an educational activist, shares stories and poems that illustrate the current picture of education in Afghanistan and the problems that schools face. Omid shares his impression of democracy and how the democratic transition <u>post Taliban</u> affected his life and his education. As a prosecutor Omid is a legal representative responsible for presenting cases in criminal trials.
<b>Sayeed</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>NGO employee</b>	Sayeed, a parent educational activist, shares stories of his children's educational experiences inside schools. Sayeed also expresses his concerns about the impact of current education on his children's lives, and his reasons for his educational activism.
<b><u>Bahar</u></b>	<b>36</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Trainer, writer and company CEO</b>	<u>Bahar</u> is a public intellectual and educational activist who shares stories from his childhood education as a refugee outside Afghanistan. His stories reveal how acts of discrimination made an impact on the lives of children. His personal stories about what motivated his educational activism provide vital insights in understanding how hegemonic forces function within the education system.
<b><u>Saboor</u></b>	<b>55</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Engineer and construction company CEO</b>	<u>Saboor</u> is a public intellectual and a civil activist and shares his knowledge about religious extremism and education. He gives his views on how the current system could learn from the progressive decades of the 1960s and 1970s. <u>Saboor's</u> stories not only add value to the understanding of the context but also suggest a closer relationship between theory and practice concerning the findings and implications of this study.

<b>Bibi</b>	50	Female	School principal	Bibi is regarded as one of the most creative school principals in Afghanistan and is acclaimed for having dedicated her life to educating children. She received all her education in Afghanistan and had to migrate to neighbouring Iran during the Taliban rule. Bibi is known for the initiatives she takes to ensure quality teaching and learning in her school. She was one of the pioneers to come up with the idea of engaging parents and communities with school affairs, which resulted in remarkable achievements for her school.
<b>Jamila</b>	46	Female	School principal	Jamila's school attracted many donors because of her proactive approach to increase the visibility of her school. While in 2005 some 1000 of her students were being taught in tents, today her students enjoy some of the most modern school buildings in Herat. Jamila continues to advocate for a better educational environment for her students.

### **3.6: Narrative Inquiry and Collecting of Data**

Stories of the participants are the main source of data. I used narrative inquiry to make meaning of those stories, and I found this process a powerful tool in communicating with the participants and making sense of their stories. Storytelling has long been a tradition among the Afghan people and as a result narrative inquiry was the most appropriate tool I could use to ensure the different, and often silenced, voices of my participants are heard.

In qualitative research, narrative ways of knowing (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) have been used by researchers for some time. Acknowledging the human element of narrative in the research work, and the subjective, contextual, rational, and constitutive nature of inquiry (Butler-Kisber, 2010), align with my understanding of using narrative inquiry.

Narrative inquiry as a process of making meaning through human experience (Hendry, 2009) served in the unpacking of the stories of my participants. In listening to their stories, my goal was to know their stories, reflect on those stories, and make meaning of those stories. By viewing the participants as the main characters in the stories they shared with me, I was able to connect to their stories with greater understanding of how they made sense of the world around them and how they responded to the situations they described (Webster & Mertova, 2007). In one story, for example, Hayedah described how she hid books inside her chadori (a long scarf-like garment that covers the whole body) during the Taliban regime to get them to her friend's house to read. I could visualise her as a heroic girl who stood for her rights to get an education in defiance of the Taliban who did not permit them to be educated. Seeing participants as 'characters' sparked more curiosity in me, and two years later I can still picture the events in their lives. As Bogden and Biklen (2007a) observe, every human is a story teller, born with an endless supply of personal and universal themes.



The tradition of storytelling is one of the unique intellectual properties that both literate and illiterate people possess in common in Afghanistan. Storytelling has been a strong part of oral communication in the country for centuries (Downing, 2008). Afghan poets, philosophers, and scholars wrote stories about the kings in the form of poems, as both praise and criticism (Adamec, 1991) of their rule. Such tradition has been passed down from generation to generation for centuries and stories provide a way for many Afghans to relate to each other. Therefore it put them at ease with me as a researcher and enabled them to connect and openly share with me.

As a form of communication, narrative inquiry engaged my relationship with the participants. Narrative inquiry provided me the freedom and autonomy to adapt to the context. The context and circumstances of each participant illustrated a unique opportunity in meaning making and understanding of the stories. It was quite evident that “ context makes all the difference” (Danko, 2006, p. 10) and for each participant I soon understood that I needed to adapt to their unique context. I would have appeared heartless and cold if I had not sympathised with them and had not tried to enter their world and understand them when they recalled sad events from the past. A common idiom in Afghanistan is *Bia dard e del konim* (let’s share sorrows of the heart), by which they mean ‘let us share stories’ which is what some of the participants were doing at times.

Some of the participants experienced different emotions while sharing their stories, seeming to feel more empowered at the end, having expressed what had perhaps become burdens in their hearts. During my data transcription and listening back to the interviews, I realised that the moments the participants expressed their emotions and the moments of silence provided rich data in my study. Narrative is a distinctive way of thinking and understanding which is unique and embodies integrating the physical and psychological dimensions of knowing (Butler-Kisber,

2010). Narrative is also described as “the way humans account for their action and events around them and shape their everyday experiences” (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 63).

In sum, narrative inquiry provided a means to effectively communicate with my participants to learn about their past experiences, present engagement in education, and future perceptions to enable me to understand what their motives for their educational engagement were. As a tool for meaning making, narrative inquiry created a space for me to make sense of the events in my participants’ lives and emotionally connect with them during my fieldwork.

### **3.7: Experience in Narrative Inquiry**

Several of my participants, when asked to share their stories, were moved by the idea. Story sharing seemed to give them a sense of significance and even fulfilment when they remembered and talked about their past experiences. A critical point I noticed while communicating with them was their reflections on their past experiences as they described them. They used phrases like, “now that I look back,” or “now when I think about those days,” which made me more curious to see the thought patterns and shifts in their thinking and the way they responded to their past experiences.

By connecting the experiences, the narrators made sense of their experiences in relation to the context they occurred and in relation to other people in their community. They remembered the events and the way they responded to those events in relation to the context which illustrated a continuum of what we call life experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In this study, I examined the patterns of this continuum to understand how, for instance, Hayedah’s experiences in primary school when her teacher mistreated her affected her perspectives today as a teacher; how she is perceived in the environment she teaches in; and how her past experiences brought her to a point to perhaps act differently from others by challenging the status quo.

The activists I interviewed had experienced some form of education in Afghanistan or had worked under one or more of the various Afghan governments in the past or the present. Throughout the stories the participants recalled their experiences several times and reflected on those experiences which added value to the purpose of this research.

I found experience key to the narratives of the participants. Not only was I informed by the events in the lives of the participants, but also by the meaning they gave to those events and experiences in their lives.

### **3.8: Process**

Identifying key terminology in my research topic and related important themes provided a critical first step for this study. The literature review around the themes provided better understanding of the research topic, and grounded this work. After receiving Ethics approval, I designed my data collection strategy, gathered information through personal contacts and review of the blogs and social pages to identify my participants, and after selecting them, travelled to Afghanistan for data collection.

I made appointments with the participants by calling them on their phones, and interviewed them either in their offices, an office I was using in a private university in Herat, in a restaurant, or in their homes. The choice of location was left for them to choose so they felt comfortable and relaxed. The minimum time that the interviews took was one hour, and some took up to two days. Throughout my conversations with the participants I used a semi-structured interview process (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) as this supports a more narrative opportunity in data collection. For example, I asked each participant: “Why are you constantly writing about education on your blog?” I then used probes to engage with them. For example, I asked each participant: “Please tell me about your primary education experience.” I used probes to ensure

that their stories and the experiences they shared aligned with my research questions and the overall goal of my research.

My knowledge of the culture was integral in my choice of the ways I communicated with the participants. For example, the way I approached Baba and the way I communicated with him was different from the way I chose to speak to Hayedah. With Baba, I needed to be more formal, keep the interview more structured and serious, and particularly be respectful of him in the use of words that were most appropriate in communicating with elders of that community. With Farid and other younger participants, however, I was more open, the interviews were less structured, and we had times when we laughed and shared jokes as my strategy for adapting to the world of the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). With Hayedah as an Afghan I made sure I kept enough distance when talking with her, used a more formal language, and ensured she felt fully comfortable with the place and the way of the interview. Interviewing women in Afghanistan requires more attention from the researcher as far as respecting the social norms and beliefs.

As the participants talked, I observed their gestures and body language. One of the reasons for such observation was to try to read their emotions and note them. When they shared their stories, it made some of them laugh, or cry, become frustrated, or relieved. Observing these emotions made it easier to find some of the experiences rooted in their past that seemed to give flavour to their current beliefs. All interviews were conducted in Dari, the predominant language in Afghanistan.

Note-taking during the interviews helped significantly in remembering the body language of the participants and aligning it to their recorded voices later during the transcript (Grbich, 2013). I transcribed the data in Dari (Persian) after I returned to New Zealand and then I translated them into English. I took two steps to ensure the accuracy of the transcription and

translation (Butler-Kisber, 2010) of my data. First I forwarded samples of my transcripts in English and in Dari to the participants for member checking (Riessman, 1993). Those participants whose English was not competent enough, agreed to get help from someone they trusted to check the English translations for them. Member checking ensured that I understood their stories correctly. Second, after I translated the data from Dari into English and had participants ensure accuracy of transcription, I sent samples of the data to a former colleague from Herat University who is an expert in translation to make sure I had translated the data accurately. I tried to keep the stories and their interpretation as close to the original stories shared by the narrators as possible to ensure trustworthiness (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) of the data. I kept the narrators' language in the first person and where possible used direct quotes from the participants instead of paraphrasing or summarising their words. This technique served two purposes. One was ensuring I did not lose the meaning of certain metaphors and unique phrases the narrators used (Clandinin, 2013), and the other was to allow the readers to make connections between the stories told by the participants, the chronology of the events, and my interpretations of their experiences and the circumstances under which they lived.

During the transcription process, I communicated with those participants I had access to, through email, Skype and Facebook texts about the data and my interpretation of the data. This communication resulted in richer and clearer understanding of the stories and a deeper level of member checking (Cortazzi, 1993). Communication with the participants also revealed new and relevant information that filled the gaps in their stories and connected the dots between present and past. After finishing the data transcription, my raw data were ready for analysis (Grbich, 2013) as the next step in my research study.

### **3.8.1: Building Rapport with the Participants**

I tried to build a relationship with the participants based on trust and respect that would go beyond seeking answers for my questions by fully engaging with their stories. This concept is supported by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) arguing that trust and respect are key in the relationship between researcher and participants. Without building trust, it would have been difficult to have the participants open up their minds and hearts to me. By using proper listening techniques, follow-up statements, appropriate eye contact, nodding, and use of culturally appropriate body language, I ensured the participants understood that their stories were very important to me. Although my participants expressed their perspectives about education in general, their narratives were quite personal, which required a strong and trustworthy relationship. A relationship based solely on questions and answers would not have given me that opportunity to engage with the participants at such a deep level. By entering the narratives of the participants, I could engage with them based on trust, passion, and respect.

The very welcoming attitude of the participants, the warmth in their voices, and their passion to share their stories with me were clear indications of how important it was for them to share their stories with me. As a researcher, I felt obligated to clarify how significant their stories were to me by using a focused listening strategy. Some interviews took several hours each and still participants were keen to share more. Meanwhile, when I had a chance to share my stories with them, they listened to me with enthusiasm, which helped to build more trust with them.

### **3.8.2: Interviewing Participants**

During the proposal stage and design of the study, I planned to meet the participants in a place where they would feel safe and comfortable (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) for sharing their stories with me. I knew from my previous research experiences that avoiding their work places,

like schools and offices, and being away from their colleagues would help them express their thoughts more freely. A few participants, however, decided that they wanted to be interviewed in their schools mostly because of their busy schedules. For example, I interviewed the school principals within their schools. One participant, Farid, invited me to a hotel where he spoke more freely. He clearly articulated why he challenged the current status of education; the need for change in education; and his vision for the education system. Baba invited me to his house for lunch and during my stay at his place he shared his narrative where he seemed to be very comfortable, and yet was hesitant to expand on some of the corruption he seemed to know of about the education system in Herat. Omid took me for a car ride around the city and up on the Takhte Safar hills of Herat, then took me to a restaurant for dinner, and we spent a few hours in his rose and fruit garden. Khadij, who worked three shifts in a day, suggested that the only place I could meet her was during her lunch break at her school. No matter the location of the interview, I became a part of the story of the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) which created a friendly environment for our discussions. It further elaborates how the people and the environment in which the narrators interact affect the current perspectives, thoughts, and beliefs of these participants (Danko, 2006).

In general, the interviews that took place outside the workspace were more vivid and smooth. The participants who chose to be interviewed out of their workplace seemed to enjoy the process more, and the atmosphere was friendlier between us. Also, the interviews that were conducted in more public places and in open areas or even in the homes of the participants revealed more about the status of the current education system. These stories were more focused and more relevant to my research interest. This impacted my study significantly as it provided me with richer data in addressing the research questions and interests.

The interviews that took place inside schools were briefer and the stories not so personal. I made sure, however, all participants were treated respectfully and their choices were respected. The school principals tried to present a picture of everything that was right in their schools, which did not contribute much in addressing the research questions because they sounded biased in favour of the status quo. They used every question to emphasise the progress they had made. It was evident that the location and context made a difference in the kind of data I obtained from the participants. The school teachers treated me as if I were a journalist and that I would later report on their progress in the media. If they had been interviewed outside school, the data obtained might have been different; however, the only opportunity to interview them was inside schools.

I was familiar with the participants and their work before I started my research and they mostly knew me as a former lecturer at Herat University. However, as I had been away from Afghanistan for more than a year, in my first interactions with them I began my conversations by sharing with them what I had been doing while away. As an icebreaker, it helped me connect with the participants and enter their world. By starting with my experiences, the participants felt more encouraged and secure about sharing theirs.

### **3.9: Analysis**

Analysing data began while in the field for data collection. After each interview I conducted, I reflected on the interview and took additional notes that would later clarify the data I had collected. Meanwhile, by reflecting on one interview, I learned how to conduct my upcoming interview more professionally by asking myself what I had missed in the interview, what I could have asked but had not, and what follow-up questions could have contributed to



richer data. Each step of narrative analysis was a collection of choices (Riessman, 1993) that I made.

After completing the data transcription, I engaged in three analysis processes. The first was rereading, sorting, classifying, selecting, categorising, making notes on the transcripts to clarify themes and supporting opinions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The second process after the selection of the themes was engaging in interpretation and elaboration of the data. I decided on the relevance and importance of the data based on key criteria. One was the number of times a theme was repeated by the participants (Riessman, 1993), another was the opinion that surprised me most, and a third was because the participants themselves made a remark that a specific matter they had spoken about was highly important to them.

In the third analysis process, I brought voices together to understand how they address my research questions and interest. I used narrative analysis as an analytical tool to unpack the experience of the narrators about how they made meaning of the past events, their current engagement in educational activism, and their future perspectives for education. A holistic approach of narrative analysis allowed an in-depth interpretation and meaning-making of the stories the participants shared; the chronology of the events; connecting ideas to understand what meaning narrators made of their own stories in relation to education in Afghanistan; and how they made sense of the world.

I examined how the participants constructed these stories and how they made meaning of these stories. I explored how narrators used their stories to justify what they did and what kind of impact their stories could have on their lives and the lives of others. Through the analysis of the stories, I tried to understand the hopes, dreams, and inspirations of these participants in relation to the activities they were engaged with and what that would mean for the education system in

Afghanistan. I used narrative analysis to understand narratives of the participants in relation to the society and community in which each narrator lived. How do these stories shape the social reality and how the narrator and the society interact? For example, I elaborated what the society was like where these narrators lived and worked and how that affected the perspectives, thoughts, and feelings of these activists. Regarding the significance of the events, I examined how the past experiences of the narrators created long-term influences in the lives of these participants.

Analysis of themes as well as the stories as a whole helped me understand how the narrators make sense of their identities (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012) and their lives in relation to social categories, gender, tribe and social class. I also endeavoured to understand what these narrators were trying to do with their narratives and how the stories they lived justified their activism.

The purpose of the analysis of the narratives was to understand how participants made sense of their stories and what meaning they made of their experiences. I sought to identify how they named things, characterised events, and what metaphors they used to illustrate a particular situation or to clarify a thought. How did these narrators use their stories to justify what they did and what kind of impact could their stories have had on their lives and the lives of others?

### **3.9.1: Holistic and Thematic Analysis**

I used both holistic and thematic approaches to analyse all the stories. However, I report some stories in a holistic way and some in thematic way. The first group of narratives provided a historical context in the study, illustrated an overall picture of the conditions of education during different political eras in Afghanistan, and covered themes from all other stories. I report these stories in a holistic way presenting the full stories. The second category of the narratives

was those which presented significant themes and concepts. I used a holistic approach of analysis for these narratives but reported them in a thematic way. I unpacked, interpreted, and examined all narratives of both categories in relation to my research questions and interest.

### **3.9.2: Holistic Analysis**

After transcription of data, review, and reflection on all stories, I identified four stories that were not only relevant to addressing my research questions but also presented an overall picture of the changing educational status during the past decades.

I chose to use a holistic approach to report these four stories that matched the first category and they provided a more comprehensive illustration of education in Afghanistan. After rereading of the transcripts in relation to my research questions, I identified some stories significantly relevant to my research interest. I used a holistic approach for understanding meaning of these participants' stories in a holistic way Biklen and Bogdan (2007b) and interpreted and analysed the story as a whole.

In the stories in which I used a holistic approach, I sought the personal experiences that participants had in their own education either in or outside Afghanistan. The stories also illustrate the interactions of these participants with the wider community; with the teachers they worked with or the teachers who taught them in the past. I also used a holistic approach for individual stories to understand the sequence of events and the context where these stories were constructed.

### **3.9.3: Thematic Analysis**

Thematic analysis is a search for themes that emerge as important or are emphasised significantly by the participants (Guest et al., 2012). After multiple readings of the data, I

identified key themes that the participants emphasised particularly, and themes that could illustrate the overall perspectives and thoughts of the participants.

During data analysis I looked for connections between words and ideas (Butler-Kisber, 2010) to understand what term or phrase could illustrate the thoughts and perspectives of the narrators. I looked for the words that were emphasised by the participants. These words or metaphors were either chosen based on repetition or based on the significance to the participants themselves in expressing their thoughts on a particular topic or event. Some of the moments that captured my attention during the interviews were the silences of the participants. Although not words, I considered the silences of the participants' significant data when trying to understand the participants and for me to feel the moments. While listening to the narratives of the participants during data transcription, I tried to picture the interviews and the moments of the participants' silences to find words to describe their silence in relation to the context and the topics they were talking about, reminding myself of the words of my supervisors that "lack of data is data". Though empty of words, the moments of sighs, looks, and silences of my participants carried valuable emotional loads and expressed much about how they felt about the specific topic they were talking about.

I used thematic analysis as an interpretive approach to unpack the themes and concepts. For example, one of the themes that came up was 'fear', which was mentioned in most of their stories. I have selected this word as one of the key themes and have examined what it means in the context of this study. I have theorised the word and its relation to the educational context of Afghanistan.

### **3.10: Ethical Considerations**

Participants were quite comfortable about describing their experiences because of the trust I had already built with them prior to interviewing them, and they were passionate about sharing their stories. Most of them did not mind being named or identified in the study.

However, given the University of Canterbury requirement to provide consent and information sheets for the conduct of the research, I did so. For all the participants in this study, I used pseudonyms and tried to safeguard their anonymity. I look at researcher and research participants as a collaborative team who share the same purpose in the research project (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). I agree with the arguments of Cortazzi (1993) stating, “treat informants with respect and seek their co-operation in the research” (p. 5), and “honour your informants’ privacy” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 5). I considered these ethical issues during data collection, data analysis, data interpretation, and report writing with due seriousness. I was conscientious of respecting research principles and protecting participants’ identity to observe the integrity of the research from the beginning of the process.

Before data collection, in order to prevent any risk to participants, my ethics proposal was reviewed and approved by the ERHEC at UC. As Biklen and Bogdan (2007a) argue “unless otherwise agreed to, the informants’ identities should be protected so that the information the researcher collects does not embarrass or in other ways harm them” (p. 50). I ensured the confidentiality of my participants’ identity during the data interpretation stage.

The participants’ ownership of their voices is emphasised in qualitative research as Cresswell (2009) notes that, “the researcher allows the participants to retain ownership of their voices and exert their independence in making decisions” (p. 90). I tried to stay as close as

possible to everything that the participants said, and the follow-ups via virtual world helped ensure my interpretations of the data represented the voices and views of the participants.

Also, I considered ethical issues at the data analysis and interpretation stage. First, I maintained my values, integrity, and honesty with respect (Biklen & Bogdan, 2007b, p. 50). I used pseudonyms for individuals and names of places to protect their identity (Biklen & Bogdan, 2007b, p. 49). To strengthen the legitimacy of my research project, I updated my supervisors regularly to ensure the project ran smoothly and according to the initial plan. I followed the principles and guidelines of the ERHEC and those of the University of Canterbury throughout my study.

### **3.11: Presentation of Narratives and Themes**

The following two chapters are findings and discussion chapters. Chapter 4 presents the findings and results in relation to the research questions. This includes unpacking of the stories, interpretations of the stories, key themes and concepts. The findings chapter also organises all the findings in a systematic way to allow a cohesive meaning-making of the findings in Chapter 5. I present the four stories for which a holistic analysis was used at the beginning of the chapter. The reason for that is that these stories set a historical context to the study and pave the way for a better understanding and analysis of the themes that emerge from all stories. Key findings of the study are clearly articulated and presented in this chapter from all stories.

Chapter 5 is a discussion chapter dealing with interpretation of results and findings. In this chapter I return to the original purpose of the study and research questions and present how the findings address those questions (Bryman & Burgess, 1994). This chapter also analyses and discusses what the findings mean. It offers what this study has contributed and why that is important. It weaves all stories together, presenting a brief illustration of the changing status of

education in Afghanistan through the lens of the Afghan local educational activists, and their perspectives for the future. Finally, Chapter 5 presents the overall meaning of the results of the study implications, and recommendations.

### **3.12: Summary**

In sum, this chapter introduced the participants and elaborated the rationale for the choice of methodology, the design of the research, and the research process. My choice of methodology was grounded in addressing the purpose of my research which was bringing forth the voices of Afghan educational activists. As a social constructivist, researcher and believer in change, my life experiences in Afghanistan, my contextual knowledge and my relationship with people there helped me in building and maintaining a strong connection with the participants. My passion for education, my vision for my future contribution towards reform of education helped me significantly in the identification and selection of the participants. The past events of my life inspired me to conduct this research with invaluable interest and a commitment to fully engage with the stories of my participants and relate to them with authenticity and continued respect.

## **Chapter 4**

## **Four Narratives that Contextualise Education in Afghanistan**

### **4.1: Introduction**

Of the 10 participants I interviewed for this study, I selected the narratives of four to illustrate the overall historical context of Afghan education, and the changes in the contemporary era. They are two teacher activists and two public intellectuals. I refer to the participants Baba and Hayedah as teacher activists as they try to provide social justice through education. Unlike the majority of Afghan teachers, they challenge the status quo because they believe it does not promote social justice and equality. I refer to the participants Farid and Omid as public intellectuals because they are not only well educated but also engaged in promoting social justice, equality, and peace by critiquing strategies and policies of the government on subjects such as education. Unlike the majority of the population, they challenge the status quo and express their views publicly. While the teacher activists are concerned about education inside schools the public intellectuals are mostly concerned about the impact of schools on society and try to represent the voice of the locals. Both the public intellectual and the teacher activists challenge the status quo and are concerned about issues of social justice and equality in relation to the Afghan education system.

I deliberately selected these four stories because of the ways they represent education under specific political regimes. Baba's story provides a historical context to Afghan education during the reign of King Zahir Khan (1960s), the government of President Daud Khan (1970s), the pro-communist regime (1980s), the period dominated by the Mujahidin and the Taliban (1990s), and post-Taliban transition. Farid's story sheds light on everyday teaching and learning during the pro-communist regime and Mujahidin's regime, and Hayedah's story mainly



illustrates the most recent changes in Afghan education in the post-Taliban era. Omid's story sheds light on the relationship between school and community.

All the stories illustrate the current engagement of these participants in relation to education and the motivation for their educational activism. As context makes a crucial difference in shaping individuals' stories (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), in the following section I present a brief explanation of the context in which the stories of the participants were developed.

#### **4.2: Herat, Home of the Participants**

Herat is located in the far west of Afghanistan near the borders of Turkmenistan and Iran. Most of the people there speak Dari (Persian). Herat was once home to remarkable philosophers, artists, painters, and poets, especially from the 10<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. In 1983, when I was born, the city had changed. It was just another war zone, with the ruins of many famous ancient structures as the only indications of its illustrious past. Due to the decades of war, most of the prominent thinkers, writers, and artists left Herat, and libraries were very frequently burnt during the Taliban era in the 1990s.

Several Western historians and Persian poets have written about Herat. Ludwig W. Adamec (1967), specialist in Afghanistan studies, states that in the 15<sup>th</sup> century Herat was "the most renowned centre of literature, culture, and arts in all Central and Western Asia" (p. 109). Some kings made Herat the capital of their dominions. Okten (2007) states that Sultan Husain Bayqra and Shahrukh Mirza were two of the kings best known for their love of art, literature, and philosophy in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, during which time Herat was regarded as one of the most ancient cities in Asia. Herat was at the peak of her glory at the time of these kings and one of the most civilised cities in the entire Muslim world. Levi (1972), a journalist and tourist who visited Herat in the 1960s, commented in his book that "the fifteenth-century ruins that survived

in Herat suggest it (Herat) must have once rivalled Meshed (Mash'had), and the sophisticated glories of Isfahan" (p. 104). According to Levi, Herat existed in the ninth century B.C before the flowering of Persia and was called Hara at that time. Levi states, "when the Iranian tribes were pushed eastwards by the Assyrian empire, a tribe called the Hairava settled in what was already called the oasis of Hara or Hera" (p. 105). According to Adamec (1991), at the time of the Silk Road which connected China to Europe Herat was also a major commercial province which attracted many merchants. He notes:

Herat is of great strategic importance and therefore has been the site of fortified towns since antiquity. It is an ancient city, first mentioned in the Avesta (the holy book of Zoroastrianism) as Hairava, which Afghan historians conjecture to be derived from Aria, or Ariana, the first "Afghan" kingdom flourishing about 1500 B.C.(p. 109)."

#### **4.2.1: The Economy of Herat**

Herat has two economic gates, one in the far west with Iran and one in the north with Turkmenistan. Herat is predominantly an agricultural province. While cotton, rice, and wheat were the major agricultural products of Herat, planting of saffron has exceeded those products today. Adamec (1991) states that pistachio are a significant item of export for Herat. He maintains that "also important is livestock breeding, including karakul sheep. Local industries produce cement, edible oil, and textiles. Home industries produce carpets, silk materials, pustins (fur jackets and coats), and products of camel-hair (p. 109)." Many argue that while the potentials for growth exist, lack of security and lack of good management result in a broken economic infrastructure in the country. Foreign interference, especially from neighbouring countries, has often caused disturbance in the economic growth of Herat. During an interview, Omid, the public intellectual participant, offered me pistachios. I commented on the pistachios saying; "I do not think one can find the quality of Herat's pistachios anywhere else". After a

bitter laugh Omid replied, “Oh, did you know that people are destroying the pistachio fields and selling out the roots of the trees?”

With surprise, I asked, “Who on earth would buy roots of pistachio trees?”

He replied, “Our neighboring countries, but I blame the ignorance of our people for selling them.” Because Afghanistan is economically dependent on its neighbouring countries and imports almost everything from them, the reason for buying roots could have been to destroy the Afghan pistachio industry. In landlocked Afghanistan, the policies of its powerful neighbours affect Afghan lives on a daily basis. Cities near the borders of these neighbours are affected more than cities elsewhere.

#### **4.2.2: People in Herat**

Several kings in bygone eras have praised Herat in their writings, and poets used metaphors such as ‘the pearl of Asia’ to describe the city. Even today people from other provinces of Afghanistan admire Heratis (people of Herat) for their intellectual and cultural richness. However, Herat today is a significantly conservative society for women compared to Kabul where women work and live more freely. There are more women activists in Kabul than there are in Herat. Politically, people of Herat are more intolerant of perceptions different from their own. However, in national contests the educated younger generation of Herat in the post-Taliban era have never failed to impress the country with their talent in arts, music, sports, and technology.

War changed the face of Herat. I remember when walking from the high school to my father’s shop during the Taliban era I would cross ‘Flowers Park’ in Herat city. In the centre of the park was a small pond. In the middle of the pond there were sculptures of big horses, beautifully decorated and designed. There were four smaller horses around the pond, all of which

were painted and decorated by one of the most famous artists of Herat a few centuries back. The Taliban destroyed these horses and many other artefacts in the city. When the Taliban came to Herat, they destroyed everything in the Museum of Arts. Both the Taliban and the Mujahidin burnt books from the public libraries. Some of the few ancient artefacts that remain are the Blue Mosque of Herat, the minarets, and the citadel of Alexander the Great.

All the changes in Herat, positive and negative, not only make the city a unique context but also create a unique people. In the same suburbs of Herat, some of the most liberal thinkers and some of the most conservative people holding anti-democratic values live together. Some families send their women and girls to developed countries in the West to pursue their studies, while others always keep their women at home. There are families who are highly pro-communist and others who are pro-capitalist. Most of this diversity is rooted in how these people and their previous generations were placed in the context of Herat city.

#### **4.3: Participants' Stories**

The first story is from an elderly teacher activist. This story provides a historical setting to this study through the sharing of his experience in education in Herat from the 1960s to 2014. The story of Baba is key as it sheds light on the context and circumstances in which the stories of other participants also took place. The second story is by a public intellectual whose theoretical knowledge concerning education was much stronger than that of the others. Farid received his primary and secondary education during the pro-communist regimes and his undergraduate education during the Taliban era.

Next is the story of a female teacher activist, Hayedah, which mainly illustrates features of the post-Taliban regime (2002-2014). Hayedah received her primary education as a refugee in Iran and was in her last semester at undergraduate school when I interviewed her. Besides

studying, she taught in at least two schools and wrote supplementary books for the schools she worked for. In a recent online conversation I had with Hayedah (May 2015), I learned that she has founded a kindergarten where she serves hundreds of children. The last story is of the public intellectual Omid who received his high school education during the Taliban and obtained his undergraduate education in the post-Taliban era. Omid was concerned about teaching values such as kindness, respect, and tolerance to school children and visited schools and recited poems to children that reflected such values.

#### **4.3.1: Baba, Teacher Activist**

While blogs and social media pages helped in the selection of other participants, I met Baba while in the field. In April 2013, I was visiting a friend to acknowledge his establishment of a new private university in Herat, and before I entered the main building, I went to the university café to get a cold drink. The owner was a skinny young man with clothing and haircut in a rural style. He was cheerful and loud and invited me to sit as he grabbed a white plastic chair and put it next to him. The dust from the road had crept into the shelves of his café, about which he started complaining. That led on to a conversation about his life. It does not take long to build trust with some villagers in Afghanistan, especially if you are an urban looking person, an educated man, or if you are a Western expat. Over a cold or hot drink, they start telling you everything about their lives.

This skinny, tall, young man had run away from a highly troubled district in Herat because of tribal clashes. He told me a story of how a young member of his family who had served there as a medical doctor had been kidnapped and brutally tortured and killed, and that he himself could never travel to his district again. Although he wanted to continue his story, I had to leave him for my friend's office. On the way I was thinking that everyone truly does have a story

and some are desperate to share their stories with the world. I was happy I chose narrative inquiry to connect to these people through their stories.

In my friend's office was an elderly man sitting next to me whom I had seen at Herat University before. He listened quietly to my friend and me discussing how my friend had managed to establish his own university. Next, I talked to my friend about my purpose for visiting Herat and my research topic. The elderly man, although quiet, seemed to be listening to my conversation carefully and analysing some things in his mind. He broke his silence and said, "I have to go now but (addressing me) I've been a teacher in schools in Herat for a few decades and I've closely worked with the education department. I know a lot about the education authorities and I even have evidence about how they work, if you want. If you think I can be of some help with your research, please contact me."

He gave me his number and left. Interestingly enough, this elderly man, Baba, was raised and educated in the same district as the young café owner. This was one of the most troubled districts in the south-west of Afghanistan where tribal clashes claimed many lives.

The next day I called Baba and asked him for an appointment. He sounded cheerful on the phone and insisted that I should go to his house for lunch and do my interview there. Although I was hoping to see him at a public library or another public place, I decided to accept his offer when he said he would feel more comfortable at home. His house was located in a different part of Herat city and it took about 40 minutes to get there. It was a suburb where a majority of Shia Muslims lived. There were tall concrete buildings, mostly with shining white stones in the front. Although the road dust had created a darker grey layer on the stones, they looked beautiful. The area was designed in a way that all houses were connected to each other and I could see hardly any gaps between them. The higher buildings, which belonged to the

richer people, blocked the sun, leaving the lower houses belonging to the poor in shadow. Baba's house was one of those that did not receive much sunshine and it was dark inside even in the middle of the day. I knocked on the door, and he welcomed me warmly, apologising that because we would be sitting in the basement it would be a bit cold. He brought in a heater to warm it up, and while indicating a mattress for me to sit on, bent down to grab a small pillow to put in behind me so I could lean comfortably against the stone wall. As he placed the pillow he said, "khosh amaden, qadam ba chashm." *Khosh amaden* means 'welcome'. The other phrase literally means 'put your feet on my eyes', which is a way to express ultimate hospitality. Exaggeration in daily life comes from the poetic side of Farsi (Dari) language, which in fact makes conversations more charming and enjoyable. Baba had a joyful expression on his face and he seemed to be very keen to talk with me. His shoulders, though, suggested a deep tiredness, and the wrinkles on his forehead illustrated a long life of experience. After he was satisfied that I was comfortable, he sat on the carpeted floor which indicated his humble and welcoming attitude as he was now sitting on a level lower than my position on the mattress. His daughter walked in with a tray in her hands as she greeted and welcomed me with the same words as her father's. She was holding tea, chocolate, pumpkin seeds, pistachio, ripe chickpea, and raisins. She filled our cups with saffron tea and left the room. I began my interview.

"You have been a teacher for a long time, and before that you experienced education during the time of King Zahir Khan and Prince Daud. What do you remember from those times? And please tell me about your current engagement," I said to Baba.

After a short silence, I could see his eyes travelling a far distance. He wrapped up his mind and started by expressing his gratitude to me and to whoever would read my report or listen to his voice. To set a context for his talk, he began by talking about the strong tribal culture of

Afghanistan and how many people traditionally valued their tribe more than anything, and that at a time of decision-making, their tribal interests would come before national interests. Baba's decision to begin his talk about tribalism, and his facial expression and sighs, clearly indicated that he felt strongly about this issue and its negative impact on the nation. He gave examples of so-called elections and how people voted for their tribes first, saying, "I can give you an example of elections in Afghanistan. When an educated intellectual runs for a position, one would not succeed if he or she did not have strong tribal ties. Our people believe that only someone from their tribe can serve them, support them, and address their needs. Fortunately, this has changed a bit these days when they notice that their vote based on tribe has not given positive results."

Then he said, "Let me share my story with you. I grew up in a remote district during the king ..." He began talking about life during the reign of King Zahir Khan and how it took two days and a night on horseback or three days and nights on donkeys and mules to travel from Herat to the district where he received the first six years of his schooling. According to Baba, the villagers had not seen a car or a bike and thought that radios with all those noises and voices coming out of them worked on magic. Some believed there was a very old lady inside who was a magician. Baba's eyes widened and lit up as he recalled those days and told me his story. His shoulders straightened and he spread his arms wide as he recounted the memories of his childhood and how pure life was despite its challenges. His voice grew louder and stronger as the tense muscles of his face relaxed, allowing a warm smile to play on his lips. From the beginning to the end of my interview with Baba, it was clear that if it had not been for his experiences during the time of the king and the first President Daud Khan, he would have been very angry at the course his life had taken.



Baba had been a shepherd, the son of a poor farmer, living in a small village spread along the foot of a mountain. Dirt roads linked the communities, with no cars to raise the dust. People were mostly busy with husbandry and agriculture, leaving home early in the mornings. Women did housework, cooking, milking cows and goats, baking, looking after children, and washing. Women were also responsible for fetching drinking water from the springs. They would walk in groups, mostly covered with dark blue, green, red, and black garments and with semi-precious Afghan stones around their necks and hanging from their ears, carrying clay jars and pots on their heads and shoulders as they fetched the water from the springs and then carried it home back up the hill.

Baba explained that people in remote areas did not like to send their children to school at that time. Some even believed that if they sent their children to school, they would become infidels. For those parents who did not possess farmlands or property, the government was not interested in providing education for their children either, in the belief that these people were wanderers with no fixed place to live.

In the mornings when he took his sheep out of the village, he would come across children of the rich on their way to school, and dreamed of one day being able to join them.

“One day, I heard that some authorities from Herat education department were visiting our district to enrol new students into schools. Without informing my father or asking for his permission, I went to school and talked to those authorities. They behaved very kindly. I begged so much for them to accept me into school. When they realised that my father was a farmer and did not own properties, they said they would not accept me. I begged a lot. I begged so much. I even cried so they would enrol me.”

Baba said that people in his village relied mostly on religious clerics for what education should be received and what should not be received. These clerics were mostly against science education, and their own education was limited to a few religious books.

The public schools, Baba went on, offered both religious and secular education. Those who received secular education would get more job opportunities, which would limit the opportunities for the more religious people. Because of that, Baba explained, the religious clerics would try to sabotage the public schools.

As Baba was pouring another cup of tea for me, I was thinking of how bold he must have been in his childhood to stand up for himself, wanting to go to school without his father's consent. As Baba was telling the story, he took a sip of tea, and with a clearer voice continued: "One of the richest and best-known people from the community was watching me as I was moaning to the education authorities to allow me to sit in a class. When he saw me weeping, he told the authorities to enrol me instead of his son. He was a respected man. Finally, they enrolled me in school. My father was informed later and he was very disappointed and frustrated by the news. He threatened me, and the next morning went to the headmaster asking him to expel me from school, which the headmaster refused to do."

Baba had a humble personality and was very hospitable. Although he stated that he was just another child trying to get an education then, in my eyes he was a hero because he dared to stand against all traditional beliefs that had ruled their district for generations. Although more than 60 years has passed since then, and Afghanistan has become more modern, many children would still not take the risk Baba took then. He told me how his father tried everything he could to stop his son from going to school. "Then my father went to Herat on foot, walking for one day and a night to get there. He went to visit a tribal leader in Herat to ask for his help to expel me

from school so I could help my father with the cattle and husbandry. That tribal leader, was a powerful man. He wrote a letter to the head of education and the head of education in return wrote an official letter to our district school to expel me.”

Baba’s description of the characters in his life; the headmaster, his father, the tribal leader, the rich man, the religious clerics, all created an image in my mind of two enemies standing against each other. There was the modern and secular education and those who held that power in their hands, standing against the tribal leaders and the religious clerics. Maybe Baba did not intend to take my imagination there, but I could visualise clearly the battle between the two. It was the secular and modern civilisation that was penetrating the traditions and superstitious beliefs that had existed for centuries or perhaps thousands of years. Baba’s father returned from Herat back to his district holding the letter in his hands, a letter that said that Baba should be expelled from school immediately.

Before Baba told me what happened when his father came to the village, the door was pushed open and Baba’s daughter entered the room again, this time with a larger tray. Baba changed the subject and said to his daughter, “Well done my daughter, bring the food, our guest should be hungry by now.” Baba’s daughter spread the sofrah (tablecloth) on the floor and laid out the food on it. “I hope you will like it,” she said with a friendly smile and left the room. Although Baba told me his story over tea, he was mostly quiet during the lunch. After lunch was over, he called his daughter to clear up, and we both thanked her as she left the room. Baba continued with his story:

“I was devastated by the news. However, I told my father that it was fine and I took the letter to give it to the headmaster; I didn’t. I tore the letter and after a few days I told my father that the headmaster had not accepted it; I lied. I already had talked to the headmaster to make

sure that if my father came, he would once again reject his request for my expulsion. The headmaster told my father, ‘If you come and go 100 times, we won’t expel your son. He is a passionate student.’ Anyway, I managed to finish sixth grade there and decided to continue my education.”

From the beginning of the interview, it was clear that Baba’s intention was not to impress me or to demonstrate any kind of heroism, but to ‘empty his heart’ as they put it in Herat. I had a feeling all through his stories that he spoke from the heart. Traditionally, in Afghanistan people send their blessings to the ones passed away. I was absolutely surprised that not even once did Baba send blessings to his father’s soul. From what I know of that culture, Baba had not forgiven his father. When he remembered the headmaster, his senior teachers in the past and when he remembered the rich man who helped him enrol at school, however, he sent them his blessings, but not to his father.

“The rich man (God bless his soul) encouraged me to continue my education and tried to convince my father to let me continue my education outside our district. He gave me money to go to Herat to attend the school entrance exam. He informed me of the dates for examinations in Herat. That day I ran away from the district wearing my shepherd’s plaid. When I reached the city, the city boys were laughing at me and making jokes about my plaid. It didn’t bother me because all I was thinking about was my examination.”

After finishing year seven, eight and nine in Herat, Baba went to Kabul for his high school after which followed two years of teacher training. The best memories Baba had came from that time (1966-1976) during the last years of the kingdom and the beginning of President Daud Khan’s government.

“I attended the exam and, thank God, six students from our district were accepted. I was the third whose name they, the educational authorities, called. I enrolled in Ibn-e- Sina School in Kabul. When I told my father the news about going to Kabul, he became very disappointed and angry at me. He threatened me and punished me. I went to the rich man who now had become the headmaster of the school. After several talks, he was able to convince my father to let me go to Kabul.”

Baba enrolled in Ibn-e-Sina School during the king’s rule which he described as the ‘golden times’. He repeatedly told me that if he were to encounter his teachers of that time, he would bow to them and even kiss their feet, such was his sincere love for his childhood teachers.

“Ibn-e-Sina had discipline, teachers were knowledgeable, and it was one of the best schools in the country. Luckily there was a dorm and the government paid for all our expenses. The discipline was so good that everything in the dorm had to be organised. If we did not keep things organised, we would be punished; our food would be taken away, etc. It sounded like a dictatorship the way they put it today. We (students) used to dislike that. Now after decades I understand how patriotic, loving, and caring those people were. Had it not been for those restrictions, we - the students coming from rural places - would not have survived in the luxury dorms of Kabul then.”

Baba emphasised that at that time teachers were well respected both by the government and by the community, compared with today when teachers possess one of the lowest social statuses in the country. He also made a comparison of how much the rule of law was observed in the government system then, compared to today, when he believes that rule of law is the last thing officials care about. Despite the progressive nature of the reign of the king, women’s participation was still limited, Baba explained. However, he emphasised that the few women

who did work in the government and women who came from other countries to work in Afghanistan were highly respected. For instance Baba remembered a few female American teachers from the Peace Corps who taught in Ibn-e-Sina and were highly regarded and respected by the male teachers and the larger community. Baba constantly made comparisons between what he witnessed today and experiences of life in his youth and childhood.

“Now that I look back and see the discipline in education in the time of the king and President Daud, the feelings of sympathy and responsibility of those teachers, their knowledge, I feel pain to see today’s situation. When I was in 7th or 8th grade, I would present at conferences. I would write things. We were very active. Today, our high school graduates have tremendous problems. In that time the social position of a teacher was highly regarded in the community. People had great respect for teachers. There was kindness. Teachers did not expect bribes in that time. A teacher, far from it, would be hugely insulted if accused of taking bribes. A teacher could live on the salary he or she was paid. Teachers had strong characters. To ask for a bribe would be more difficult than digging a rock mountain with your hands. It was a culture of transparency. Let me give you an example of transparency during the king and an example of corruption in the current government.”

Baba went on to share his experience about Ahmad Zahir, one of the most popular Afghan singers in the last century who lived during the time of the king and whose father was prime minister. “Ahmad Zahir failed in the entrance exam at a time when his father, Dr Zahir, was the prime minister of Afghanistan. At that time the prime minister made no effort to enrol his son in a university by using his power and influence although perhaps he was able to do so.”

Then Baba remembered another experience from that time: “I had a classmate her name was Sima. She too had failed to enrol in higher education and was pushed to complete two years

in teacher training. Her father was one of the ministers of the king. When she came to classroom, no one would have known that she was daughter of a minister and the teachers treated all students, including her, in the same way. Teachers had high social credit and the people in the government were good enough not to interfere with a teacher's work. The teacher had full authority. Values were ruling, not nepotism. Law was ruling, not nepotism.”

As Baba was thinking of examples of corruption in the current government, his face grew tense, and the wrinkles on his forehead, especially the ones in the middle between his eyes, became more visible as he continued his story: “Now, a student doesn't go to school half a year and yet is promoted to a higher level because he is son of a commander or a parliamentarian or senate member. I want to share something with you, something I myself witnessed. I give you permission to convey this account in its entirety to your audience. There would be no problem. I witnessed in the entrance exam that one of the people's representatives, [Baba was referring to a member of either Parliament or Senate] invited the officials in charge of exams who came from Kabul for lunch. After he had fed them well, he then organised a special room for his son and a couple of other candidates and he himself decided who should monitor the room. The son of that man entered medicine school as a result of that. This was a violation of the rights of less-privileged candidates.”

His voice shook and he seemed to have difficulty talking about his experiences of corruption. He struggled with his own thoughts, appearing desperate to reveal the names of the authorities engaged in corruption, yet seemingly fearful of talking about them.

Baba also criticised people in the community for not being engaged with schools. “Families do not feel responsible for their children. They make schools responsible for everything. People in general are not used to observing the rule of law. While in foreign

countries when the light turns red, even the animals stop. Some people do not observe that here. Children need to learn about these socio-cultural norms in schools so they start to obey the law. We must teach children about human rights, kindness, and mercy in our schools.”

Baba referred to children as treasures and insisted that his message to the families, government, and people was to invest in their children. He expressed the hope that if the government eradicated corruption in the system, the more educated people would become leaders in education, and so improve the quality of education. Education, he believed, was a part of the larger government system, and as long as the government system remained corrupt, the education system would remain corrupt. He thought it would be very difficult to eradicate corruption from the education system while other pillars of the government remained corrupt.

It was evident from Baba’s passion, gestures, and expressions that he was presenting his story sincerely, as he recalled his primary school days and how he longed to go to school when he saw the children of the rich enjoying this privilege. What intrigued me during my interview with Baba was the variety of emotions he displayed; moments when he felt tired, took deep breaths, and moments when he feared to reveal details he seemed anxious to expose. He proudly talked about daring to stand against his father as a child in order to go to school, despite his father’s threats and punishment.

Interviewing Baba was not an easy task. The story of his struggles in childhood to get an education, the price he paid for that, and the pain and suffering he endured, indicated it had been a time of great hardship. It was disturbing to see in what poor circumstances he lived after having served in education for decades. In a Facebook chat I had with him later after my data transcription, I found out that despite his small income, he helped tens of students from poorer families by providing them with school notebooks, pens, and pencils.



As I interviewed Baba, I sympathised with him and could relate to him when he struggled with his emotions as he recalled the challenges life had presented him. His emotional struggle seemed to tire him when, perhaps for the first time, he was able to share all those experiences and the burdens in his heart he had carried with him for decades. Baba recounted his life from the time he looked after his flock, walking long distances in search of green pasture in the ruins of his district up to the time the Taliban forced him to leave his beloved profession, which is still suffering from the consequences of corruption and nepotism. These all had negative impacts on his life. I thought to myself: If Baba had started this journey in a developed country and had strived for what he believed in so hard, would he still be living such a poor and miserable life?

A few times Baba seemed to want elaborate on the examples of corruption in the current Education Department in Herat and to name people involved, but he decided against this. It seemed to be a difficult decision for him to make, although in my first meeting with him at my friend's university he had told me he would present first-hand information about what was going on in the department by providing evidence. I decided to let him decide and did not insist so he would feel comfortable about what he did and did not want to reveal. I wished during his long pauses that there were ways to read his silence, his internal monologue. I wondered what fear stopped Baba from speaking his mind. Could it be that he feared the authorities? That would not be surprising considering there have been instances of journalists being threatened by government authorities, warlords, or commanders for reporting details about them that they did not want the public to know about. It has not been uncommon for some of the warlords in Afghanistan to have their own prisons at home.

Baba's fear of revealing instances of corruption in the education system resonate with what I learned from many Afghan teachers. In some informal conversations I had with several

teachers in Herat, their biggest fear in criticising leaders in education was losing their jobs. Many in-service teachers who took my courses at Herat University seemed to struggle with their fears. As a psychological and mental challenge, Baba said that he was not regularly in dialogue with the educational authorities through his activism. Instead, he complied with the status quo in the public schools but created his own circle of influence where he organised events for the youth outside school. It is evident in Baba's stories that the less the educational activists communicate about the system with the authorities, the more deeply entrenched the status quo becomes in favour of the authorities. However, Baba's initiative to influence the youth and teachers outside schools by organising events could be both a challenge and an alternative to the status quo if developed in a professional way among more like-minded people. However, Baba indicated that many highly educated and like-minded Afghans left the country for good after the military coup that overthrew President Daud Khan in 1978. He insisted that this process was still continuing today. This was at its worst case during the Mujahidin and Taliban regimes, he emphasised, when schools became agents of ideological propaganda. Teachers who were able to find jobs with international organisations left school, and the only ones remaining were those who had no other options. Baba heaved a sigh and said: "Only the few teachers who were unable to find jobs outside schools remained in schools with some disappointed students."

As I was leaving his home, Baba hugged me warmly and wished me good luck with my studies.

In sum, Baba, in this study, is a living history of education in Herat during the past few decades. He was raised and educated in the greater district of Herat, which has been one of the most troublesome districts in the country during the past few decades. This district where he was born and received his primary education has experienced, and still experiences, harsh tribal

clashes, claiming hundreds of lives, though the number of victims has decreased significantly as a newer, more open-minded, generation gains influence in the district. According to Baba, there was peace in this district during the era of the king and the first president in the 1960s and 1970s and villagers had great respect for one another. “Everyone was busy with farming and husbandry then.” Baba said, expressing the hope that education could bring peace back to his homeland.

#### **4.3.2: Farid, Public Intellectual**

I knew Farid’s sister better than I knew him, so I called her and said I wanted to meet her brother for my research. The next day Farid and his sister came to our house and picked me up. Several characteristics distinguished Farid from the majority of people I knew in Afghanistan. He had an unusual appearance with a round face. His eyes appeared very mysterious and seemed to be half shut much of the time, giving the impression he thought a great deal and took life seriously. He looked at least 10 years older than his actual age and had lost some hair. Despite driving the car of the year, he wore old and untidy clothes, which made him seem even more complicated. He spoke fast and peppered his speech with lots of short poems as if he were sitting at a shirjangi (poetry competition) where one competitor recites a poem and another is supposed to recite a new poem that begins with the last letter of the poem recited. His loud and strong voice and serious expressions made it almost impossible to disconnect from him or ignore him, even for a moment. These qualities gave no hint that in fact he was a satirist who not only brought laughter to the faces of his listeners, but who also bravely criticised the top political figures in the country, despite apparently having received threats, he told me.

Farid drove through the streets I had been in many times since childhood. However, being in his company made the city feel different this time, because he had something to say about the government complexes, schools, and the international consulates or agencies we passed

on our way to the International Commerce Hotel, the tallest building in Herat. He talked non-stop while his sister, sitting in the back seat, was mostly quiet as she listened to her older brother. If it had not been for his liberal perspectives, Farid would not have allowed me and his sister to be inside the same car in the conservative environment of Herat. Many Afghan men do not even walk with their sisters in public in order to ensure other men do not see them.

One of the schools we passed on our way was Amir Ali Shir Nawai High School. Farid explained that Ali Shir Nawai, a scholar and minister of Sultan (king) Husain Bayqra in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, was a lover of arts and literature and a man who built tens of schools and art galleries in his time. While Farid was talking about this cultural and historical asset, I was thanking God they had not named all schools after the warlords or tribal leaders, a not uncommon practice in Afghanistan.

We turned into Blood Bank Road, and Farid parked his car across from the restaurant, observing, “my car has a secret lock and an alert is installed so no one can steal it.”

We did not enter the restaurant through the main entrance which was usually used by expats who stay at the hotel part of the commerce building. On the left side of the building there was a dirt road which led to the back door and the yard. At this door were armed men who indicated that we should stop for a security check. Farid’s sister went to the ladies’ security check room while we were searched in the public area. Then we registered at the reception which allowed us access to the building. We took the lift to the restaurant on the ninth floor and were treated to a beautiful view of Herat as most of the other buildings were much lower. We sat at a round wooden table that gave me a view of the twin towers, which remained incomplete and unoccupied. They belonged to one of the richest men in Herat, but because it was discovered that

the land on which they were built belonged to the government and that an entire public road would be blocked if the towers were completed, building work had to be stopped.

As we sat at the table, I explained to Farid what my study was about and my purpose for doing it.

Farid chose to begin his talk with an explanation of the concept of totalitarianism and its relation to Afghan education. In his opinion totalitarianism, be it religious or political, was a major concern in the education system in Afghanistan. He emphasised that to break out of the totalitarian approaches in education, the work of humanist mystical poets such as Rumi should be integrated into the educational curriculum. He believed that German philosophers Hegel and Nietzsche were fond of Rumi's philosophies. In his opinion Rumi's work is more metaphysical and centred on divinity while Western philosophies are more centred on human nature. However, in essence both perspectives, he affirmed, agreed on the same humane principles and values. He recommended that the distinction between these two needed to be considered in my thesis.

Farid argued that the divinity that Rumi discussed in his writings was different from religious perspectives. From a traditional Islamic religious perspective, he said, the implication is that everything in the lives of people is pre-determined and they have little or no power to change themselves or the circumstances. People like Rumi, however, challenged that totalitarian perspective by questioning the religious dogmas. According to Farid, for Rumi, human beings were creators of their own fate and their own future and God had given this freedom to humanity as a birth right. Farid insisted the beliefs that everything is pre-determined had kept the country backward and the people ignorant of their own potential.

In Farid's view, children simply listen to the teacher, memorise what he or she says, and during the examinations regurgitate the teacher's exact words.

Farid elaborated on Rumi's mystical view, saying, "He encouraged people to be active in this world and value things on the face of the earth, unlike some other mystics who did not value life on earth as much and prepared for the hereafter." In summing up, he said, "Live with people, drink with them, eat with them, work with them, drive the car of the year, enjoy iPhone 5, serve humanity, and always keep God in your remembrance."

Farid was very passionate about Rumi's philosophy and wanted to continue talking about this. However, at this point I asked him to talk about his own self and his education.

Farid grew up in Herat city, the son of a jihadi (Muslim fighter) who joined the jihad (religious war) against the Soviet Union. These jihadis who fought against the pro-Soviets came to power in 1992. Farid showed me his house. Unlike the majority of jihadis, whose houses were worth millions of dollars, Farid's father, though a key figure of the Mujahidin, lived like other ordinary people. What made Farid unique was that when sharing his stories, he took a significantly critical and professional stand. He supported his arguments by quoting from Afghan philosophers like Rumi, Sanai, and Avehina, and Western philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Plato. Also, while a great majority of the sons of Mujahidin supported their fathers' ideologies, Farid based his arguments on what he had truly experienced and believed. Farid's education seemed to have had a tremendous effect in shaping his own perspectives, making him distinguished as one of the few in Herat who took a critical stand against his father's ideologies. Farid explained that it was not necessarily his schooling that helped him with his critical viewpoint, but his extensive reading and his self-education. Farid's secular views were quite unique and rare in Herat. He was one of the most courageous people I have met for defending his secular views in a highly conservative society. His parents and siblings, who had lower educational achievements, lived a more religious and conservative lifestyle compared to

Farid. The use of the term conservative in that context may be different from the way people in the West may refer to it. I use the word conservative for the people who are religiously intolerant and can hardly tolerate anything that does not comply with their interpretation of religion. For instance, to have a conversation with them about other faiths would be almost impossible.

Farid's experience of education at primary school was gained after the era of Daud Khan's government in the early 1980s during the pro-communist regime when, as Baba described it, the education system had started its downturn. He said that on the first pages of the text books was a symbol of Khalq (the party in power). Although the education system was centred on Marxist ideologies, the pro-communist regime did not ignore science subjects but they were taught in conformity with Marxist theories. He also mentioned that the number of religious subjects in comparison to maths, science, and social sciences, were minimal. Farid noted that the quality of education was not satisfactory. He used the metaphor of a broken CD to describe the quality of education from the time of the pro-communist regimes in 1978 till now (2014).

“It is like a broken CD that has stopped at one point and makes unpleasant noise and doesn't go forward.”

Farid described the teacher-student relationship as an “intended and pre-planned” mechanism of compliance where students who agreed with their teachers were commended. The reason for this, he said, was to inhibit students' curiosity and discourage critical interactions between teachers and students. Ultimately, the goal of the parties in power, he believed, was to keep the masses ignorant and to sustain the status quo for their own political interests and benefits.

Farid said: “It has been the on-going tradition of education for decades for the teacher to read, say, or preach and for the students to listen and obey; no discourse, no dialogue. Even if a teacher acted in a creatively different way and engaged in questioning and discovering with the students, such a teacher could even be expelled from school. Many students entered universities after school with the same attitude of saying ‘yes’ to whatever the teacher said. If you see someone with a Master’s degree who is yet to some extent illiterate, do not be surprised. The system was designed this way.”

Farid emphasised that in his experience, practical learning was very poorly regarded in schools, and teaching was all about content coverage. He argued that even poems from critical philosophers like Rumi were handpicked; meaning poems chosen for the text books did not spark any creativity.

The foundation of human thinking, he said, was in education, starting from an early age. “As we reach higher education, we must reach a point where we can see our thought patterns and processes, take charge of our thoughts, and reflect on what we do and think. This is not what is happening in our universities in Afghanistan because schools fail to prepare students with the ability to reach self-realisation.” Farid clarified that by education he did not mean expertise in a profession or merely skills and knowledge, but the kind of education and knowledge that enables a child to think for himself or herself regarding how he or she relates to the world, to others, and to his or her own self.

“In Afghanistan we have many examples of doctors, engineers and other professionals who are good at their profession but when it comes to social behaviour, attitudes, and communicating, they are illiterate,” he said.



It was around 1pm, and while Farid was talking, the waiter came and took our orders. After lunch I asked him if he would share any memories he had from his own education.

One experience he remembered from his primary school was that he thought teachers were shy. For instance, in biology lessons about heredity, they would quickly pass over the topic so they would not have any discussion about reproduction.

Reflecting on his schooling experience, Farid summed it up by saying, “no whys were answered, be it at school or university.” He added that students were like horses with blinkers, making it impossible to see anywhere other than in front where the teacher stood.

He explained that in 1992 the Mujahedin brought to Afghanistan the education system that had been used in the refugee camps in Iran and Pakistan, saying it had been much worse than the one during the communist regime. Everything was designed around jihad and war. Farid used an Afghani saying to describe that situation. “They asked a starving man, what does 2+2 make and he responded ‘four breads’.” He explained that the Mujahidin not only encouraged people to conduct jihad against the Soviets but that they also designed systems such as the education system to provide them with tools that would inspire the young generation to join jihadi movements. Farid gave an example of how pictures of guns and bullets were incorporated into the textbooks.

Concerning education during the Taliban era, he said they reduced the teaching hours of subjects such as maths, physics, and science and added the religious subjects of Feqh (jurisprudence) and Arabic. During the school week, there was one hour of maths and six hours of Hadith (short narratives about the Prophet Mohammad). Good teachers left the country and those left in schools knew very little. Teachers would teach in the morning and sell potatoes and onions in the afternoon to survive because of the high cost of living. They had no time to read or

rest or keep abreast of new developments in physics, maths, and chemistry. From the beginning of Mujahidin rule to the end of Taliban control the standard of education declined significantly, resulting in the “death of education”, in Farid’s words.

In the post-Taliban era, according to Farid, attempts were made to make education more academic, but many problems still existed more than a decade later. Ministry of Education staff failed to keep up with changes in pedagogy and subject content. According to Farid, there was no knowledge construction in schools. He described the teacher-student relationship as ‘a dictatorship’. Students did not have the courage to question anything, particularly in religious subjects. He suspected that even many Afghan civil activists would *not* have a clear definition and understanding of citizenship. “Schools are too far removed to have the ability to engage students in learning what citizenship is all about,” Farid said. He described concepts of ‘citizenship’ and ‘democracy’ as prepared meals for the Afghans and all they did was swallow it “while the ingredients and spices of the food were not the right ones for their stomachs”. This is how the Western model of democracy and citizenship was, Farid emphasised. He gave an example of his grandmother. Quoting her he said:

“During King Zahir Khan’s time, women who worked in the government were asked to wear skirts and socks. I wore them. Even walking was difficult for me and I’d fall down as I was not used to them. Gradually I learned.”

While he supported his grandmother’s statement, Farid argued that the king had not asked all Afghan women to look alike and all of a sudden become modern as King Amanullah had expected in the 1900s and failed. King Zahir Khan had created examples for others and had been patient.

Farid suggested the masses needed to be educated about democracy in schools, through social mass media, social events, and gatherings. People needed to first have a certain level of knowledge so they could understand the values of life in a democratic society, he argued. He clarified that for thousands of years Afghanistan had functioned as a tribal society. Traditions, beliefs, norms, practices, and even superstitions were ingrained in the population. To promote democracy, he said, one needed to have a profound knowledge of the long history of the country, people, and their way of life. Such knowledge, he believed would help in problematising the notion of democracy before implementing it. Those who advocated forms of Western democracy were ignoring the importance of such knowledge and needed to problematise and contextualise democracy before seeking to implement it in the country, he said. Farid gave an example of how people were told to vote in a democracy but did not know who to vote for nor what criteria applied. His viewpoint resonated with Baba's view that many people voted for their tribes or relied on a community leader to decide for them who to vote for. Farid argued that most of the people in Parliament and the Senate were not there because of their expertise or professionalism but because they had money and connection with the warlords who convinced people to vote for them. Farid emphasised that "the foundation of education must be built first". He added that he believed that schooling was a part of the problem. "In schools we are learning from each other like parrots. We say things in words, but when it comes to action we are stuck."

Farid concluded that he believed strongly that democracy was possible in Afghanistan and that education could play a key role in bringing about a democratic state. He explained that "through a more secular lens democracy does have a place in Islam, but from a fundamentalist point of view, it does not". However, democracy must be specific to Afghanistan. He referred to it as "third world democracy". He insisted that a liberal democracy would not work in

Afghanistan. “In liberal Western democracy there is so much about equality which does not work in tribal Afghanistan where tribal leaders are not ready to give up their power. In a third world country, the values of the elites and their position must be considered for democracy,” he said. “For example, a tribal leader should be given a different authority. So, a Western democracy cannot work here. People do not want to lose these values and powers.” He insisted that a third world democracy would create a dynamic situation where tribal leaders would retain their authority and meanwhile would be obligated to abide by the rule of law. According to Farid, such democracy would be a good start for the country to progress towards a standard democracy.

#### **4.3.3: Hayedah, teacher activist**

I interviewed Hayedah in the Psychology Department of the Education Faculty where she was spending her final semester as an undergraduate. In addition to pursuing her education, Hayedah taught in two schools. She had long busy days. She spoke very softly and with emotion as she shared her school experiences. She seemed to create pictures of her experiences in her mind as she spoke about them. I found her shy and extremely reserved. She came from an economically depressed background in Herat, which was one of the reasons why she taught two shifts as well as studied in her long working days.

She said she had received her primary education as a refugee in Iran. She laughed as she talked about how she had been encouraged by her first grade teacher and how disappointed she had been when other teachers had discriminated against her because of her Afghan nationality. She said: “I don’t have many good memories of that time, because teachers didn’t treat students fairly and some of them discriminated against me because I was an Afghan.”

However, she also had one good experience in first grade that stayed with her throughout her life. She said: “I remember the first word I wrote was ‘water’ and I wrote it incorrectly. Still the teacher encouraged me, which made me very happy and inspired. That was my first motivation to learn and love school”.

Hayedah said that among the many experiences where the teachers had discriminated against her and made an impact on her life, was the following: “In third grade I had a classmate who came from a rich Afghan family. You know those who make money from others through corruption. She brought expensive gifts to the teachers. The teachers encouraged her a lot and expected the same from me, given that she and I were the only Afghans in that classroom. Because I could not afford to bring gifts to the teachers, they discriminated between us. It was Teachers’ Day. My mom and I hunted (the markets) till we found a very beautiful flower for my teacher; I can picture that day now. I brought the flower to the classroom and the rich girl had brought a very expensive gift; a painting with a bunch of flowers. The teacher thanked her several times. When I gave her the flower, she said, “See how beautiful the gifts the other Afghan girl brought are. You should learn from her. I was hurt and I hated her; that childish hatred!”

When Hayedah talked about what happened at school to her mother, her mother came to school the next day to complain. Hayedah added: “I was sitting behind the window and I suddenly saw my mom pass our classroom and go towards the school office. After a few minutes I saw her going back. I didn’t know why my mom came to school but when our teacher entered the classroom, she shouted at me, ‘Why did you tell your parents?’ I was terrified, scared, and I kept silent.”

She conceded that she started to hate school and hate that teacher. Hayedah and her family ended up in Afghanistan, aiming to stay there forever. However, after one year, because of insecurity, poverty, and because the Taliban closed schools for girls, they had to return back to Iran. Hayedah continued: “This time I was older. I went to a different school. I chose to spend most of my time in the library and with Afghan friends only. Iranians were discriminating and I didn’t want to be close to them. Even the teachers encouraged their own children only, not us Afghans.”

Next Hayedah went on to talk about her younger brother who was at an age to start primary school when they returned to Iran, but because he did not have a refugee card, he could not enrol in a school. Hayedah said her parents forged a card and sent their child to school under a different name and ID card. She added, “My mom decided that her son should grow up educated regardless. My brother finished four years of school under a different name.”

Hayedah was ten years old when the Taliban came to Herat. She described her memory of that day: “I will never forget the morning the Taliban came to Herat. It was terrifying. All the school doors were closed. I thought it would be for two or three days, and I was happy about the break at first. Then my mom told me that schools were closed forever. I could see worry and pain in my parents’ faces when they were talking about what had happened. It bothered me a lot. I missed being with my close friends in school. I felt hopeless.”

Hadayah said that she started reading novels at home during the Taliban time. Her father would ask her to stay home most of the time as he thought it was not safe for her to go out. She borrowed books, read them, and hid them under her chadori before taking them to her friends. “We became such fast readers that I’d read a novel in a day and exchange it for another one,” she said.

Hayedah's family decided to go back to Iran. She explained that moving back and forth was extremely difficult for the family, yet what did not stop for Hadeyah and her younger brother was education. Books were her best friends, she said.

After the defeat of the Taliban, Hayedah and her family returned to Afghanistan again. She was accepted in a school four years above where she had been in Iran as they found her talented and already familiar with course content. Laughing, she said: "It was such a joy to be home and to return back to school. I will never forget the bliss of that day." She described how students had to have classes in tents during the hot summer days. She remembered: "Physically everything was broken. However, there was joy. There was excitement and soul. It was just like heaven to me. There was hope. It was really good. It was really good."

Hayedah concluded by saying that since her return from Iran and her return to her school in Afghanistan, she undertook drawing and writing projects for other students as part of her activism in her school. Because of her love for education and her understanding of the crucial importance of education in peoples' lives, she taught at least two shifts in addition to her studies and created books that sparked children's creativity and had practical applications in their lives.

#### **4.3.4: Omid, public intellectual**

Omid belonged to a privileged and wealthy social class and family in Herat. He ran a business and at the same time worked with the Afghan Government. He was a contemporary poet, and poetry writing was his passion. His voice and thoughts about education were hidden in his poems and metaphors which needed to be unpacked and elaborated to be understood. Through his lens, one could look at schools from outside. He hardly talked about education directly. Instead he illustrated the manifestation of education in the community. He

linked the socio-cultural problems the community faced to the poor quality of education, believing that schools and communities mutually made a negative impact on one another.

Language and literature were Omid's way of communicating with schools. To him language was a crucial part of culture and an important means to teach values to children. His poetry was appreciated by some language teachers. To him, language held a culture and conveyed strong values and beliefs. Omid's educational activism was mostly in the form of writing about his feelings and emotions, which he shared with others. He reflected on social problems and the injustices and inequalities of society in his poems. He believed schools could make society a more just place, which was a reason for his poetry reading. Omid visited schools and read his poems to children to raise their awareness about why they should care about issues in their communities, and as educated people address the problems their neighbourhood faced. The poems Omid read for the children were about social justice, peace, kindness, and making a difference. His logic was that because schools mostly require students to memorise content and prepare for exams, these students had little chance of reflecting on such important virtues. He believed his poems would help children realise that the reason for their education was to become good people and good citizens and not only for the sake of obtaining a degree.

Baba and Farid also raised a similar concern about the current pedagogical approaches in the Afghan schools where children mostly memorise content and prepare for exams. However, Omid's experience also reveals that schools allowed him to share his poetry with their students. His initiatives to connect school with the community indicate that perhaps some schools are open for change which signals possibilities and hope.

At one point, Omid sighed and recited a poem: "The stories of our lives today, are stories of suffering and pain; stories of separation of water from the spring."



In elaborating on his poem, Omid explained that he worked as a prosecutor which introduced him to many cases of violence, injustices, and brutalities that people inflicted on one another. Most of the victims belonged to some of the poorest and least privileged people while those who committed the offences usually had connections with tribal leaders and warlords. These cases illustrated the pain and suffering of people which inspired Omid to write about them. “These days, instead of sonnets and poems, my bag is filled with piles of war victims and documents of violation stories.” He described the current days in Afghanistan as “dark days”, claiming that the “moon and sun had hurt the nation”.

It is common among Afghans to use the terms dark or darkness to illustrate negative and unfortunate circumstance and events and to use the metaphors such as sun, light, and moon to describe perspectives that are positive and promising. Omid used the metaphor dark *days* to illustrate his worries about the violations that were inflicted on his clients.

He insisted that it was not just the schools that impacted on society but also that society impacted on schools. He reminded me of the increasing influence of a culture of bribery and corruption in the government system that affected schools. He described those who promoted the culture of corruption and bribery as being “black faced”, saying that these days it was no longer a shame to be “black faced”.

Omid’s concerns about corruption and bribery were directly linked to its negative impact on education. He said that a democracy that was rooted in the values of the Afghan people could function and promote transparency in the country. His belief about schools being an important place for the teaching of democratic values resonated with Baba and Farid’s beliefs.

Omid believed that corruption and bribery as negative forces imposed on schools were products of the wider oppressive social and political system and the fault of the people in power.

Expressing this in poetic form, he wrote: “So that they can root out the rot in society, as they claim, they set all our gardens on fire. This is what happens when a herd of cows are in power in a country. Oh the dark cloudy perfume of the Hariwa city (city of Herat) rain a bit on the roots of the explosions and ashes in this city.”

In this poem Omid describes how the oppressive powers claim to do good for people but they deceive them. He complains that he has lost hope for the oppressors to change or for the ordinary people to be able to challenge the status quo.

However, he went on to say there was hope for change in children. He argued that while it was hard to change adults’ mind-set, children were ready for such change. In his opinion social problems have been imposed on the ‘defenceless and voiceless’ people, and on the children in Afghanistan. Once children learned about what created the problems that society was facing, the chances were they would not repeat the mistakes of those before them.

Though from a wealthy and privileged family, Omid tried to be the voice of the voiceless; mostly the poor. He complained about what he called a “bitter reality” where the rich were becoming richer and, in their greed for power and money, made use of any tool to oppress the poor, and use the less privileged people to gain more money and more power. The poor become poorer every day. Another of his poems describes these imbalances: “I feel like they (the oppressors) have stolen my heart from me; they have locked me in a chain of destiny. I have many reasons for goodness but; from top to toe they (the oppressors) have targeted me by the timber of blame; they have stolen freedom from me.”

Omid insisted that the way to freedom was for one to be able to write his own destiny. The power that gave man that freedom was knowledge and awareness. However, the current system of education, he believed, did not present much opportunity for children to design and

write their destiny. He believed that the political authorities were to be blamed for the poor quality of education and schooling. He did not blame teachers but the oppressive system and particularly the oppressive regime in power. His claim to stand for the voiceless meant to stand against the oppressive regimes who he believed controlled schools and education. He believed that the public were the victims of the powerful and that a different approach to education could promote justice for the public.

In one of his poems he compared the Afghan political leaders to jaybirds, complaining how some Afghan authorities called the Taliban brothers.

We cannot obey a jaybird or a pigeon  
We cannot become pagan of such businesses  
There is a difference between a loud voice and whispering  
We cannot compare a lion to a cat.  
Those who have put their sharp swords on our throats,  
We swear to God that we cannot call them brothers  
Like the absurd and hellish slaves  
We cannot worship positions and dollars  
Our mountains are pearls, precious pearls  
So are our breaks and mud;  
We cannot deal this land against money and gold.  
The roof of our home is that of justice  
And the body is that of knowledge.  
We cannot make this home the house of the cruel oppressor.

Omid's poem expresses the idea that because the 'oppressive' authorities are corrupt and their biggest concern is money and power, they hardly care about people. He argues that accumulation of money and material goods being the centre of the authorities' activities, has turned the public-government relationship into something like a business where the government authorities become richer and the public poorer. He believed that some government authorities "worshipped positions and dollars".

Omid also complains that although the Taliban constantly kill civilians, some government authorities, including President Karzai, refer to them as 'brothers'. Omid emphasises that

ordinary Afghans like himself would never call the Taliban ‘brothers’. His concluding thoughts in this poem are that the reason the government fails to respect the dignity of the ordinary people and calls their enemy ‘brothers’ is because the government is thoroughly corrupt.

His method of fighting back against the ‘oppressors’ is through education and by raising the awareness of school students and the public in his community.

In sum, Omid’s expectation for schools was to promote social justice. Although his inspiration to advocate for justice came from his job as a prosecutor attorney, he sought justice to be taught in schools. He believed that if schools promoted concepts and values related to social justice, he would not carry piles of documents about violence, as education could reduce violence by raising people’s awareness. Despite his dissatisfaction with the quality of education in schools, he was able to present his thoughts, which perhaps indicated the openness of some schools to accepting different ideas from the community. Although he represented a more privileged class of society, his voice reflected what he believed was the choked and unspoken voice of the local people. While he himself came from a rich background his concerns for justice were mostly for the poor who form the most vulnerable people in society. It can be understood from his arguments that a healthy and safe community would be a product of better schools. In his own words “education could cure the pains and sufferings” of people.

#### **4.4: Conclusion**

The four narratives presented in this chapter, provided a holistic picture of the relation of power and education in Afghanistan from the 1960s till the current era. The stories of Baba, Farid, Hayedah, and Omid illustrated the everyday concerns, struggles, hopes, and aspirations of these educational activists. This chapter also provided a landscape and context for better understanding of the key themes and concepts to be examined in Chapter 5. In addition to

providing a historical context to the study, stories of Baba, Farid, Hayedah, and Omid exemplified the different ways these activists work as well as the similarities and differences in their approaches. The similarities were that they all believed in an education that would promote peace, social justice and equality. They believed in the potential impact of schools on communities and that such impact could be enhanced through quality education. Another similarity was that all participants demonstrated great hope and desire for the future of Afghan children. The differences were mostly in the styles and approaches of their activism. For example, Baba tried to teach differently in schools and conducted seminars and workshops for the youth outside schools to raise their awareness. He challenged the educational authorities by sharing with the youth his perspectives that were against the status quo. Hayedah worked within the education system and wrote books that would make her schools independent from using books that came from other countries. She also challenged the school authorities by establishing closer relationships with students so they could have a voice in schooling matters. Farid's activism was mostly theoretical. He critiqued government policies and strategies regarding education and challenged the current practices of education by posting on his blog and by sharing his perspectives via mass media. Lastly, Omid's activism mainly consisted of obliquely trying to educate the public through his poetry to raise their awareness of what was happening in the politics of the country. Because overt criticism could carry serious risk both for the criticiser and those who were seen to listen to him, poetry with its oblique use of symbolism and allusion provided a platform to raise people's awareness about their rights, abilities, and responsibilities to critique and challenge those actions by the state and powerful people in the community that did not serve the national interest of the people of Afghanistan. His audiences were thus offered a space of safety where they could be seen as appreciating his poetry simply as an art form

without being noted as participating in potentially rebellious meetings. In this way, Omid was trying to go back in history and use similar strategies that the poets of the past, such as Rumi, had used to provoke thought and discussion about values and ethical practices. In a similar way he took his poetry into schools in the name of sharing his art. Whether the students fully understood his allusions is debatable. What is interesting is the way he was habituating school teachers and students to receive ideas that were complex and provocative. Such complexity can be seen as a valuable gift within an experience of school that predominantly involves rote learning.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Voices of Educational Activism in Afghanistan: Thematic Interpretation of Participants' Narratives**

#### **5.1: Introduction**

This chapter marks and examines the most significant themes raised in the stories of the participant activists. The stories, those of the four participants presented in Chapter 4 together with the stories of six other participants, are examined thematically in this chapter. The voices of both the teacher activists and the public intellectuals are represented in these themes, representing the two lenses through which these participants view education. The first is the 'inside' lens presenting the views of teacher activists such as Baba, Khadij, Hayedah, Bibi, and Jamila who work within the education system and inside schools, and the other is an 'outer' lens reflecting the voices of the public intellectuals. This outer lens presents the perspectives, concerns, and view of the locals including parents from the communities surrounding schools. Because of the culture of domination in schools, obtaining more views of the teachers from inside school would put them in danger of perhaps losing their jobs or being identified as trouble makers. Therefore, to gain a better understanding of what occurs inside schools and classrooms, I interviewed the teacher activists who were exceptions to the rule and who had already spoken up and challenged the status quo. These teacher activists are a small minority in schools as most teachers are not willing to challenge the status quo or are unable to freely express themselves. Therefore to gain the perspectives of the locals and communities on education, I interviewed public intellectuals who attempted to be the voice of the silent majority and would be willing to share their perspectives with me as they did on social media.

Drawing together the perspectives illuminated through these two lenses, the themes presented in this chapter reflect the diverse yet unified voices of participants through my analytic meaning making and the interpretation of the participants' ideas and thoughts. I have also attempted to elaborate on why what they have said is significant in order to draw conclusions from this study that are subsequently presented in Chapter 6.

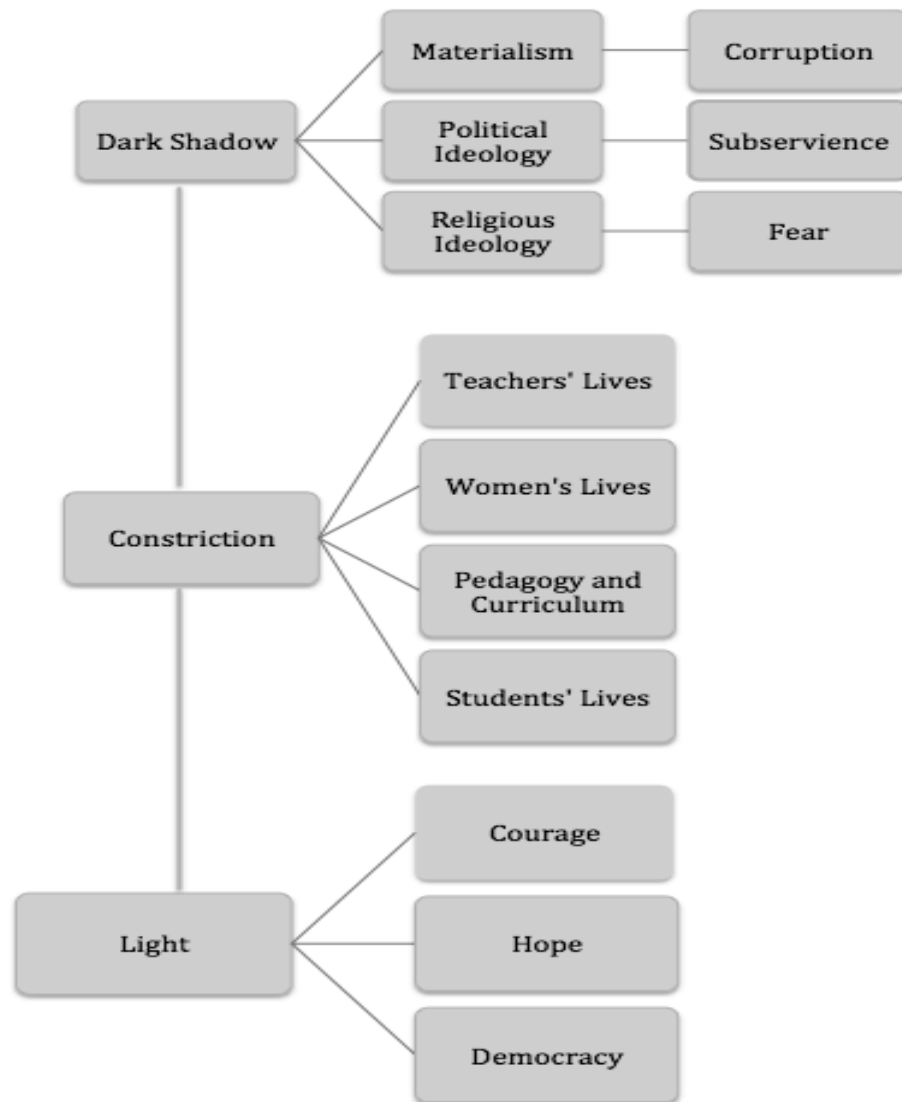
Based on the perspectives, concerns, and thoughts of the participants, I used three criteria in identifying themes. One was issues that participants referred to multiple times in their narratives regarding the effect on their education. Another was issues that were common to nearly all participants, and the third was those issues that were marked by the discourse of the participants through the use of the word 'important' signalling their clear perspective on their significance.

Although the themes presented in this chapter are the key themes raised by the participants, it is important to note that not all participants talked about every single theme presented here. However, without exception, all participants were concerned about what they believed was the poor quality of education in Afghan schools. This was evident as I transcribed the narratives of the participants, as it was clear in their stories that they believed that the issues examined in this chapter as key themes were factors in what they saw as the poor quality of education in Afghanistan. For example, whether the participants shared their views about the restrictions in women's lives or on democracy within the country, they nevertheless shared their impressions of how these social phenomena contributed to the poor quality of education. Three key themes emerged from the voices of the activists, Dark Shadow, Constriction, and Light. Within each of these themes there are sub-themes which reflect the various ways these overarching themes were manifested within narratives. The overarching themes encompass the



thoughts, perspectives, concerns and desires of the participants of this study. These themes and subthemes are illustrated graphically in **Figure 2** below.

### Figure 2: Major Themes and Subthemes

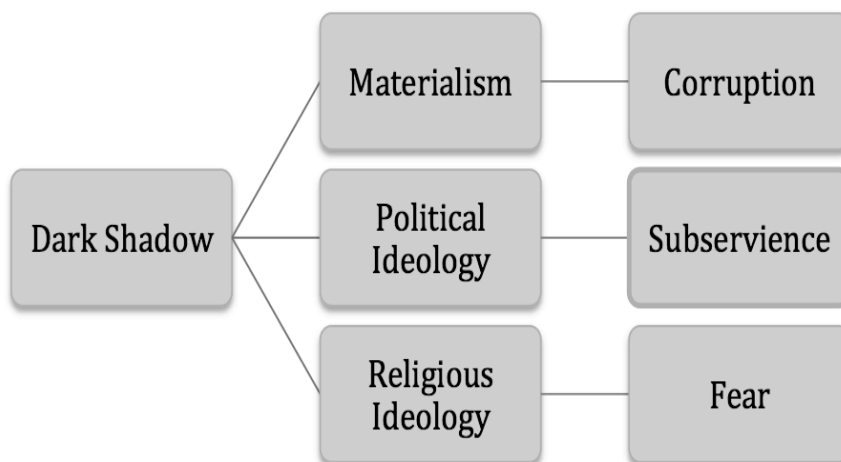


## 5.2: Dark Shadow

To illustrate the influence of the ideologies and regimes in power over education, Saboor, one of the participants, used the metaphor of ‘dark shadow’. I chose ‘dark shadow’ as an overarching theme as it provides a platform and context to present voices of other participants. Saboor expressed his worries about the influence of political, religious, and foreign domination over schools. I have used ‘dark shadow’ to capture this theme, as the mood and image of a ‘dark shadow’ captures the concerns of fear, subservience, and corruption expressed in the narratives of the activists.

The narratives and perspectives of the participants suggest that there are three faces to ‘dark shadow’. As shown in **Figure 3**, they are: materialism; political ideology; and religious ideology. These dark shadows manifest in three forms in the narratives of the participants. They are; corruption, subservience, and fear.

Figure 3: **Dark Shadow**



### 5.2.1: Materialism

Public intellectual Farid viewed ‘modernism’ in its absolute materialistic form as a dark shadow. He insisted that he did believe in a modern Afghanistan and strived for it. However, he viewed modernism ingrained in ‘absolute’ materialism damaging to the human soul and social life thus he thought schools had an obligation to raise awareness in the students of a moderate and humanised modern Afghanistan versus a highly materialistic modern Afghanistan. To him a moderate and humanised modernisation was that which considered both the spiritual and material wealth of the people. He warned that a materialistic form of modernism alone could turn humans into machines and that “it could eat all the spiritual wealth of mankind, if a balance of a spiritual and material wealth was not kept”. He clarified that by spiritual wealth he did not mean a religious belief or practice but instead a process of self-realisation and self-creation through the recognition and discovery of inner wonders that would create more empathy, care, and kindness among human beings. Farid did not critique modernism as a philosophical movement along with its cultural trades and changes (Taylor, 1989) but his argument was based on his impression of modernism in its extreme materialistic sense which was mostly inspired by his life experiences. Farid suggested that ‘materialism’ affects schools through the growth of corruption given that the multi-billion dollars of aid money poured into Afghanistan resulted in growing corruption in all sectors including education.

It is important to note that while ‘materialism’ was a matter of great concern to Farid, other participants including Baba, Saboor, Omid, and Bahar expressed their concerns about corruption and constriction as manifestations and outcomes of ‘materialism’. For example, Sayeed spoke of the economic constriction in teachers’ lives, and gave an example of how the “advisors of the presidents” receive thousands of dollars from the government while teachers’

salary is around NZD 70. He explained that some of the aid money that was originally given to the government to support school teachers was used by the Minister of Education and other government authorities to give to their “advisors” who were either expats or the families of the authorities. Saboor also indicated that materialism and its product corruption was one of the reasons for the economic constrictions in teachers’ lives. As an example he explained how the educational authorities could treat a teacher from a rich family differently from a teacher who came from a poorer economic background.

#### **5.2.1.1: Corruption**

Farid and Saboor argued that the main reason for the expansion of the culture of materialism was the multi-billion dollars that came to Afghanistan through the aid system, and with the significant increase in money came corruption. Both argued that because the governmental, private, social, and political systems that functioned in the West did not exist in Afghanistan, soon the international community lost control over the proper distribution and use of the aid money. Accumulation of money as material wealth became the main interest of those in power in the country, which created lack of transparency in governance and management resulting in the expansion of corruption at all levels. Besides Farid and Saboor, Baba also spoke of corruption and believed that corruption had a direct effect on education.

Baba believed that existence of corruption in the education system as well as the government system as a whole was a major reason for the poor quality of education. “After the collapse of the Taliban regime, we have made great progress in terms of quantity, but in terms of quality of education we are still very, very poor. We have some schools with fancy buildings but with little quality of education,” he said.

Baba further stated that nepotism and lack of transparency in the leadership of the education department grew as a result of corruption. He illustrated his argument with an example of how a head of department is put in a position not because he is qualified but because he is a family member of someone powerful in the government who is loyal to the minister the same way that the minister is loyal to him. Therefore, he felt that the dominant group controlling education in Afghanistan prevent the voices of the local people and local activists from being heard. Baba explained how the network of powerful people, which many Afghans refer to as a ‘chain of mafia’, made the struggle of his work and the work of likeminded people more difficult. He pointed out that corruption made negotiation with the government significantly difficult. Baba, Farid, and Saboor argued that some of the key governmental positions including military positions are sold to certain people by the ministries. For example, positions such as the head of customs or the head of the police, or a mayor in a province generate large sums of money through bribery, misuse of government facilities, or even selling government properties. Saboor suggested that a portion of this money is sent to the higher authorities in the capital Kabul, to the authorities who appointed their people to these positions that generate money.

Bahar commented that compared to the amount of money that the department of education has received through aid, there have been very few changes in the education system. He shared his impression of the extent of corruption and maintained that it was not just bribery but other forms as well. “A candidate with little or no experience may be hired because she is beautiful while a more experienced and educated person is not given the job.”

The parent activist, Sayeed, also shared his perspective about corruption. He argued that when one individual is appointed as the Minister of Education, he designs all policies based on what he wants for children to learn and that is proved, for the most part, to serve the minister’s

ideologies and interests. He commented that the current Minister of Education, Farooq Wardak, had played the most destructive role in the education system in recent history. His claim did not surprise me as the mass media had already accused Wardak of extensive corruption.

Farid's frustration, on the other hand, was about the lack of transparency in recruitment in the Education Ministry. "The same (unprofessional) old man who cannot even walk is still in charge of the literature department at the ministry. His thoughts on education have not evolved for the past 50 years and he prescribes the same old-fashioned policies over schools in the country," he said.

Farid's argument was that the high ranking government authorities who are involved in corruption fear to bring young people and young minds into the government offices because the educated young tend to speak out and disclose the corruption to the media and masses. Therefore, the authorities tend to keep their elderly colleagues even though most of these 'old men' significantly lack contemporary knowledge of education and some lack the skills needed for the role.

In Chapter 4 Baba shared a personal experience where the son of a member of parliament was a candidate at an entrance exam and his father used his influence to help his son on the day of the examination. According to Baba, the examination authorities who had brought the questions from Kabul were invited to this man's house for a meal. When the exam started, the authorities provided the son of the parliamentarian with a special room where he could cheat undisturbed.

Baba also elaborated on corruption in relation to nation building and governance. He argued that neither the concept of government nor the concept of a nation has improved enough in Afghanistan. "Because of war many people joined groups and parties of their own tribe.

Unfortunately, people feel safe around their own tribe and that is why they stay within their tribe.”

Baba believed that tribalism also contributed to corruption and has had its negative effect on education. He emphasised that every tribe that came to power first incorporated their political and tribal values in the system. During the reign of King Zahir Khan and the government of President Daud Khan, however, Baba claimed that the education system had exhibited a more national character than a tribal one. He also commented that the downfall of education started after Daud Khan’s government, and every regime subsequent to that changed the curriculum for their own benefit, which, based on Baba’s perspective, was yet another facet of corruption within the system.

Saboor, Baba, and Farid mentioned that international donors including USAID, the UN, and the World Bank have invested millions of dollars in the education system since 2002. However, they argued that despite all this investment, there have been minimal changes in the education system, one of the chief reasons being corruption in the government and education system. For example, Saboor argued that the reason for the breakdown of the educational infrastructure could be because the government is able to escape accountability for the millions of dollars in international aid. According to him, most of that money “went into the pockets of the authorities and warlords who owned the companies that contracted with the donors”. He suggested that perhaps the amount of money given to education since the collapse of Taliban rule was more than any amount dedicated to the education system in the entire history of Afghanistan. Yet, he argued, there was little to show for it. Saboor maintained that the transition, post Taliban, was not transparent and the government was shared among the highly corrupted political parties and warlords in the country.

In sum, the narratives strongly suggest that materialism manifested in extensive financial corruption is one of the major problems in the post-Taliban education system, and has contributed significantly to the poor quality of education. It is evident in the stories that from the perspective of these educational activists the leadership and educational authorities of Afghanistan have performed poorly in establishing the infrastructure necessary for quality education.

### **5.2.2: Political Ideology**

Although only one participant, Saboor, presented his perspectives regarding ‘political ideology’, I chose to present this theme in this thesis for three reasons. One was that Saboor was well informed and he had researched about the relation of Afghan education to political ideology from the 1970s onward. Second, while other participants did not talk explicitly about ‘political ideology’, their concerns resonated with the arguments that Saboor presented in the interviews I had with him. For example, other participants mentioned subservience in relation to politics but did not use the specific language of ‘political ideology’. Third, by providing historical evidence, Saboor articulated ‘political ideology’ in relation to my research interest well by noting that the ‘darkest shadow’ over schools was politics. According to him, this shadow appeared since the coup against President Daud Khan and the establishment of the pro-communist regimes in 1978. He explained how Noor Mohammad Taraki (1978-1979) came to power through a violent coup by the pro-communist regime, which claimed the lives of President Daud Khan and his family. This coup opened Afghanistan’s doors to the Soviet invasion in 1979. According to Saboor, the influence of Marxist theory and communist ideology was obvious in the school textbooks published by the pro-communist regimes.



Saboor added that the pro-Communist soon decided on changes to education, and gave some autonomy at least to higher education. According to him, the Soviet Union directly supported institutions like polytechnics where Saboor received his higher education.

Their support, though ideological according to Saboor, also improved the quality of learning and teaching in terms of the technical content. Saboor claimed that the quality of education was significantly better during the pro-communist regimes compared to the rule of the Mujahidin and the Taliban. However, Saboor emphasised that with every political change in the country, the ‘dark shadow’ has existed over the schools and has taken different forms regardless of whether the government was pro-communist, Mujahidin, the Taliban, or post-Taliban.

According to Saboor, after the fall of the pro-communist regime and the victory of the Mujahidin, everything changed. He saw how the Mujahidin came with the culture and literature of jihad and war and incorporated that into the curriculum.

“They (Mujahidin) knew nothing about governance, thus brought the culture of weapons, war, and force. The goals and thoughts of the jihadi leaders were taught in the institutions (the refugee camps in Iran and Pakistan). These were ideological and political thoughts that made the students dependent on the (jihadi) parties,” he said.

Saboor claimed that the ideology of the Mujahidin was to prepare children to either join or support the jihadi movement once they became adults. By teaching their ideologies through text books, they could easily manipulate students’ minds in favour of jihad. He clarified his claim by comparing the mind of a child to a blank board that one could write anything on.

“Text books were published in Iran and Pakistan, and the literature of jihad was so fully integrated into the curriculum that even today we see some influence of jihad in our schools (in Afghanistan). The (jihadist) groups in Afghanistan always said that the key ministries (in the

government) were ministries of defence, interior, and intelligence because these people (jihadists) entered (the system) with jihad and war ideologies.”

Saboor also believed that the ‘dark shadow’ of the politics of the Taliban had a negative impact on education. He maintained that the rural and tribal Pakistani curriculum was taught in Afghan schools during the Taliban era. He emphasised that from his perspective education in schools during the Taliban era did not have anything to do with the students’ growth and learning. He said he sent his children to school during the Taliban era not because he hoped they would learn something, but so that they would continue developing the habit of going to school. He emphasised that education was not regarded as important by the Taliban and the Mujahidin.

“It was clearly written in the books, one pistol, two pistols, one Kalashnikov, two Kalashnikovs, one tank, two tanks, one bullet ... they used these symbols to direct students’ minds towards jihadism and war.”

Saboor assumed that incorporation of such matters in the text books was jihadi strategy to promote jihad in the country, and they used schools for that purpose.

#### **5.2.2.1: Subservience**

Subservience was another manifestation of the ‘dark shadow’ of political ideology that was a matter of concern to the participants. Farid, Baba, Saboor, Sayeed, and Omid argued that in past decades the groups in power designed the curriculum with the object of making the younger generation of Afghans subservient, passive and fearful. Bahar and Farid also described subservience as an important concept in the traditional beliefs of the Afghan community. In Afghan culture subservience shows that a child has good morals. Farid explained that the more subservient a child or a youth was, the more moral he or she was regarded. For example, when adults talk children are expected to be quiet and listen. He argued that children bring the

mentality of ‘subservience’ from homes into the classroom, and this culture even penetrates into the universities later on. Farid criticised the over-emphasis on subservience as a “false” virtue, and said the way it is interpreted in Afghan schools blocks curiosity and creativity in students.

Farid explained how in most classrooms teachers consider silence and the lack of curiosity as good qualities in students. Similarly, he argued that very limited conversations take place between teachers and the school principal, which too is regarded as a sign of discipline. “Orders come from above, and as a child you are a member who is subservient, a listener, and just a prosecutor of the orders. The first commander is the father, then the mother or the oldest brother. Since childhood, this mentality grows in children.”

Farid also noted the general perception Afghans hold regarding teachers, saying: “The teacher (is) a superior commander and the student (is) a subservient person. There is no questioning, meaning there is no dialogue and no discussion. Students do not have the right to challenge an opinion.”

Farid explained that subservience enters classrooms partly from home and society. Religiously, politically, and culturally, children are expected to be subservient to their elders. Even if an elderly person says something incorrect, someone younger than him would be considered rude to correct him or to notify him of his mistakes. Farid discussed that in cultures where children are subservient, the relationship between old and young is seen as superiority versus inferiority, which weakens the possibility of dialogue. According to Farid such a model of learning and teaching is the dominant pedagogy in Afghan schools. Students expect teachers to know everything and students usually have a passive role in the classroom. Students are taught to be subservient. Farid maintained that being subservient is also true for teachers. He pointed out that those teachers who are subservient and accept everything that is imposed by the department

of education on them, are the ones who survive at school. If a teacher stands against the status quo and opposes a decision of the department of education, he or she could be deployed to a remote rural school or even be fired.

In sum, subservience manifested as a result of political and religious ideologies as well as traditional beliefs was described as a facet of ‘dark shadow’ by the participants. It can be understood from the stories of these participants about subservience that the passive role encouraged among teachers and students may be an intentional strategy implemented by the tribal, religious, and political leaders who control education to maintain the status quo that benefits them. Bahar’s example that children learn a list of ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’ at school and merely regurgitate in examinations what teachers have told them, implies that the curriculum might have been designed that way. The participants argue that the more the people are kept unaware and in the dark, the more it helps the political leaders to maintain the status quo for their own benefit and to accrue more followers.

### **5.2.3: Religious Ideology**

‘Religious ideology’ was mentioned only by Baba. There were four reasons why I chose to include this theme in this thesis. First, as a teacher, Baba worked under the oppressive religious system of the Taliban and had first-hand experience of teaching when most of the subjects taught were religious subjects in their most radicalised forms. Second, Baba examined the impact of religion as a crucial part of the education system from the time of the king in the 1970s to the present as he had experienced and witnessed. Third, while other participants did not mention ‘religious ideology’, they linked ‘fear’ to religion which resonated with the concerns of Baba and emphasised the significance of this theme. Fourth, Baba’s arguments were well

informed and relevant and significant to the purpose of this study. For Baba, religion was the face of ‘dark shadow’ over education.

Giving his impression of education during Taliban rule, Baba said: “The education system during the Taliban era became a religious system, which did not represent the true values of Islam. All educational subjects such as biology, chemistry, and maths were washed off from the system. The religious subjects that substituted these subjects were not what the people of Afghanistan desired. Outsiders imposed them. They deprived a great part of society – women – of an education.”

Baba mentioned that most children in school during the Taliban era were disappointed as they had no hope for a better future. The Taliban forced teachers and students to wear turbans and grow beards. Baba believed that the damage the Taliban, with their strict religious beliefs, made to the education system still affects it and it may take years for it to recover.

To clarify the religious ideology as a ‘dark shadow’ during the Taliban, Baba shared one of his experiences of teaching during that time: “When they (Taliban) came, schools became stagnant. Yet in order to make a living, I continued my job (as a teacher). There was no learning (for students). One day I was standing on the stairs when I saw a Talib stop two of our teachers, one of whom had a short beard. The Talib insulted the teacher and threatened him and slapped him on the face. That moment I decided that I couldn’t work with these people (the Taliban).”

#### **5.2.3.1: Fear**

Ideas related to fear appeared in the narratives of Saboor and Baba who mentioned ‘political ideology’ and ‘religious ideology’ as the faces of ‘dark shadow’. They described how fear manifests as a product of these ‘dark shadows’, and in particular of the religious ideology. Fear was mentioned as one of the most significant and overarching concerns of the participants

in relation to the current state of Afghan education. Several activists including Hayedah, Bahar, Sayeed, and Farid mentioned fear many times and spoke about it in many ways, such as it evoking a memory from their school experiences. They also talked about how they felt Afghan schools used it to develop an attitude of subservience in students, and also spoke of it metaphorically as a ‘tool’ used by the dominating forces being the warlords, tribal leaders, and religious leaders within Afghan education.

There are two forms of ‘fear’ manifested in the stories of the participants. There is fear for children who seek critical and explorative discussion of thoughts and ideas from their schooling. And, there is a fear for students to develop a nonconformist worldview that would challenge the status quo. For example, Sayeed, a parent, believed that the reason his children could not learn well and were not engaged in the classroom was their fear of making a mistake or upsetting a teacher. With obvious frustration he remarked: “My daughters are filled with a thousand questions. Obviously, they can’t ask their teachers. My daughters say, ‘Where is God? What is He doing?’ I believe there are no questions in the world that cannot be answered. But of course if my daughters asked these questions in school, they would punch them on the face and call them infidels.”

Sayeed suggested that his daughters’ fear of being labelled ‘kafir’, ‘infidel’ (a non-believer), disengaged them from active participation inside the classroom. It also indicated the level of intolerance there was when discussing questions about religion, the existence of God, and diversity of beliefs. Sayeed’s frustration with the education system and especially with the educational authorities was so obvious that even during the interview, he would shout at times blaming the educational authorities for the poor learning of his daughters. To Sayeed, ‘poor learning’ was a result of his daughters’ fear of asking questions in class. He said that unlike in

school, he allowed his daughters to ask him any questions; even if those questions were about God's existence. He explained how he encouraged his daughters to see God as a source of love and not fear.

Disengagement of students because of issues of 'fear' and a fearful environment was also an issue raised by the activists. As a public intellectual, Farid spoke most forcefully about this. For him the most serious problem of the climate of fear permeating schools was that it disengaged students from learning. He argued that children should be given the freedom to reflect on what goes on inside the classroom and in their lives outside schools. He insisted that schools should give the children the ability to engage in conversation with their teachers and other classmates to understand how their schooling affects their everyday life and their relationship with others. Farid suggested that one of the reasons why children were disengaged was that they viewed the teacher as a distant superior being whose social and professional position was too high for the children to reach. He indicated that children did not possess enough confidence to engage in a conversation with the teacher as they believed they were too young and naive to ask their teachers any questions. For example, it would always be a teacher who would ask students simple questions such as 'how is your day?' but children in turn would not dare to ask their teacher the same question.

Farid also viewed fear from a broader context. He believed that Afghan people living in fear of oppressive groups such as warlords and religious extremists, and in fear of financial collapse and unemployment also affected the schools. Farid argued that fear had roots in the peoples' beliefs about life as well. According to him many people leave everything to so-called 'fate' and they believe that things happen because they are meant to happen that way, thus they do not attempt to change conditions. Neither do they question or critique anything that has

already been ‘written in their fate’ because that would be regarded as questioning the authority of God, and therefore a sin. These are examples of how religious ideology affects the everyday learning of the students. Although Farid had a satirical way of talking and sometimes laughed at the educational authorities, sometimes his anger with them was also evident in his voice. He claimed that the government did little to change the ‘passive identity’ of the students. “We wait for the apple to fall into our mouth. This problem starts at school. We do not strive for things. We wait for things to happen to us.”

Farid used the story of the apple to illustrate how Isaac Newton thought of gravity as the apple fell on his head and how curiosity led him to a great discovery by the simple means of observing an apple falling off a tree. He clarified that children must be encouraged to think, come up with ideas, explore their ideas, and be supported to take practical steps in response to their ideas. His perspective was that for children to explore their curiosity there needs to be openness in education and in thinking, and the current political and religious ideology permeating education serves to discourage this possibility. He pointed out that Afghan schools do not encourage children to pause, ponder, and ask themselves why the apple fell on the ground and did not go in a different direction. Farid thought that children should be able to ask themselves ‘What does it tell us? What else can be learned from an apple falling?’

Another participant who brought up fear as one of his crucial concerns in relation to education was the parent and public activist, Bahar. He emphasised that a significant problem with the education system that causes the creation of fear, is that everything is viewed through the lens of religion. He was critical of the way teachers often try to link most of the issues inside a classroom to religion. He commented that teachers do this especially when they lack information, thus, the best way for them to silence students, even at tertiary level, is to link the



issue to religion. Bahar noted, “Religion is holy; however, if we link religion to maths and science, we destroy all (essence of the subjects).”

He insisted that when an issue is linked to religion, it shuts the door for dialogue because religious content is always seen as fact, perfect, and beyond question by many ordinary Afghans. He argued that engaging in a critical dialogue with most teachers on a religious content (regardless of how it is interpreted) is impossible as other views would not be tolerated. Bahar explained that even at the higher education level, he feared to critique or ask the many questions he had in his mind.

“I know that the teacher is saying something wrong but I don’t have the courage to discuss or engage in an argument. If you critique, they immediately call you kafir.”

Bahar expressed similar concerns that Sayeed expressed about fear in relation to his daughters’ education. He claimed that teachers impose certain beliefs on students and students cannot question those beliefs. These beliefs are regarded as facts even if they are very naive and invalid ideas, he said. He insisted that it was particularly impossible to open up a debate with a religious teacher who did not respect other thoughts aside from his own.

Similar to Sayeed, Bahar was more concerned about his children’s education than his own education. According to him, for children the world becomes restricted once they enter school. He explained that students spend 12 years in school and end up with a list of ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’ with some basic literacy knowledge. Bahar’s frustration about the inability to question teachers’ opinions and to express his thoughts freely, made him believe that the education system in Afghanistan is a dictatorship.

Although describing the school environment as a dictatorship may seem strong or extreme, Bahar and Farid seemed to have clear reasons to believe that this description is valid. In

support of their criticism they cite teachers' fear of interfering in the authorities' job at school, teachers fearing to question the culture of schooling, and students' fear of asking questions or expressing an idea. Another example of dictatorship, according to Bahar, is that the majority of school graduates who enter universities are dependent on the lecturers and are hardly self-directed. Bahar's views also resonate with the understanding of the public intellectual, Farid. Both agreed that students are not enabled to think for themselves at tertiary level. It can be understood from their concerns that they too, along with Sayeed, fear for the safety and growth of their children and about their future. Farid's criticism is that children hardly learn about their own abilities in deciding on their own future and creating their destiny.

Like Bahar, Farid described the current education system as a 'dictatorship' stating: "Students do not have the courage to correct a teacher while he clearly sees that the teacher is making a mistake. Our education system is a dictatorship. You must accept limited thoughts and minds. (As a teacher) I inject into your mind and you don't have the right to question anything."

Like Sayeed, Bahar seemed to have no problem with religion itself. His concern was about the limited interpretations of religion that are imposed on schools, and in every subject in school. Such an interpretation of religion, according to these participants, creates an atmosphere of 'dictatorship' inside the classrooms given that religious views are extremely sensitive in the Afghan community.

Besides Sayeed, Farid, and Bahar, the teacher activist, Hayedah, also shared her concerns around the phenomenon of fear. As described in Chapter 4, she shared several stories of her childhood, including the one she remembered about a primary school teacher who had discriminated against her. In relaying that story she talked about the fear that resulted from that

event, saying, “After my mom came to school to inquire about the teacher’s misbehaviour, the teacher warned me not to tell anything that happens inside school to my mother.”

What happened over two decades before in Hayedah’s life, stayed with her as a bitter memory now that she is a teacher. She said that after that day she hated that teacher. ‘A childish hate’ she described it. Hayedah emphasised that now that she is a teacher herself, she wants to make sure she does not do that to her students. That negative experience in her childhood has turned into a positive attitude towards her own students later in life. Hayedah insisted that she never wants her students to fear her.

Another manifestation of ‘fear’ was evident in my interview with Khadij. While I was interviewing her at an international private school in Herat, the school principal entered the room and sat at a desk without asking if he was disturbing us. Khadij did not say a word about her work at that private school and instead she only talked about her experience of teaching at public schools. It was understandable that as soon as the principal entered, his superiority over the teachers and his position of authority made the interviewee more hesitant about expressing her views, and at times this teacher was too afraid to say anything. I asked Khadij if we could meet at a different place and on a different day but she said that was the only office at school for interviews and that she was too busy to make another appointment at a different place, so I continued the interview. As a matter of respect and precaution, I did not ask any questions about private schools although it could be that the principal sitting there did not understand the language we were speaking or perhaps he did not realise we were in the middle of an interview. However, it could be argued that even if Khadij had not said a word about education, the story was there and very relevant to my research; the story of a private school principal who entered an interview room without asking for permission or showing any respect for the people engaged in

the interview. The presence of the school principal in the office and the hesitations and fear of the teacher indicated that perhaps many teachers live under pressure from the education authorities.

In summary, the stories of the narrators suggest that one of the greatest obstacles in the path of students' learning in schools is fear as a face of the 'dark shadow'. The experiences and concerns of these narrators reveal that fear has social, religious, and political roots; that is they arise from the ideologies that permeate the socio-cultural milieu.

### **5.3: Constriction**

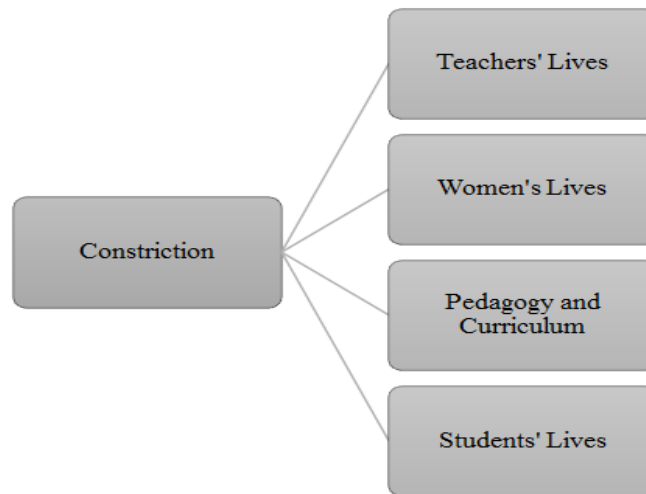
The second theme that emerged from the stories shared by these activists is constriction. It is clear that the political and religious ideologies, along with traditional beliefs, have resulted in a range of constrictions on people's lives, and on the learning that occurs in schools.

These include:

- 1) Teachers' lives, where teachers make up one of the lowest social classes in society;
- 2) Women's lives, as it is they who suffer most in the country and are regarded as second-class citizens;
- 3) Pedagogy and curriculum where content coverage and memorisation have become predominant methods of instruction and learning, and
- 4) Students' lives where many students had to leave school to join their families in seeking refuge in other countries.

I chose the theme 'constriction' as it illustrates the perspectives and concerns of the participants in relation to Afghan education as shown in **Figure 4**.

Figure 4: Constriction



### 5.3.1: Teachers' Lives:

Decades of instability and the ideological wars constricted the professional and socio-economic aspects of teachers' lives. The lives of the female teachers were particularly disrupted as a result of such constrictions. In parts of Afghanistan where women can work, teaching is considered the only right and appropriate job for them. However, this profession is also a struggle for many Afghan women. The teacher activist, Khadij, said she worked three jobs at three different schools and loved teaching and had a passion for education. Besides teaching, she looked after her mother, younger sister and herself for which she had to work very hard. Despite her three jobs, she could only make enough money to survive along with her family.

Although economic survival was one of the reasons for her teaching three shifts, she mostly seemed to teach at schools because of her love for education and her love for children. Khadij said that she was not happy with the education department in Herat.

Aside from the psychological pressures that teachers seem to go through, the poor economy adds greater pressure to their lives and that also seems to lower the quality of education in the country.

Two other participants who shared their perspectives on the life of a teacher were Bibi and Jamila who elaborated on the economic and professional mechanisms of constriction in their lives. Bibi explained that the majority of teachers could not afford to purchase books or have their own libraries at home. While her school was fairly well equipped, most other schools did not have libraries of up-to-date books for the use of teachers. Both Bibi and Jamila said that after the collapse of the Taliban regime and the flow of aid money to Afghanistan, many teachers were given short seminars on various educational issues. However, they were critical of these seminars provided by aid agencies, saying they did not help develop teachers' knowledge and skills because they mostly ignored the reality of the context of schools or had no follow-up support. Khadij and Hayedah agreed with them that the 'capacity building' seminars were of poor quality, and that although the content of the seminars was good, they had no application in real school life.

The public intellectual activists Saboor and Farid also expressed their concerns about teachers' lives. Saboor noted that teachers during the pro-communism regime were highly educated. At the polytechnic higher education institute, he said the lecturers were educated in Ukraine and at well-known Soviet universities and that they were professionals. Regardless of their ideological beliefs, they were knowledgeable people. Most of those teachers, regrettably, left the country during the Mujahidin and the Taliban eras.

Farid added that teachers who stayed in Afghanistan during the Taliban and Mujahidin eras lived under severe conditions. "Teachers could not survive on the salaries they received.

With turbans on their heads and wearing traditional clothing, they would sell potatoes after school till it was dark (to support their families). When he (a teacher) got home at night, he did not have any energy left to talk to his family. Teachers knew nothing about what was going on in the world of physics, chemistry, and maths (because they had no time to prepare).”

Professional constrictions on teachers’ lives also disrupted teacher-student relationships. Reflecting on the teacher-student relationship today, Farid observed that students were unable to express their opinions inside the classrooms or to engage in dialogue with a teacher who had made an obvious mistake. To improve the teacher-student relationship, he suggested that a new culture should be created in schools. As noted previously, Farid summed up his understanding of teacher-student relationships saying: “A teacher-student relationship is still a dictatorship-based relationship.”

Farid expressed appreciation for some of the short-term seminars and workshops designed to improve the skills of teachers and which were provided by aid organisations after the collapse of the Taliban regime. However, he argued that such seminars were not enough to generate any radical change in schools or create a shift towards a different education system. He explained how these seminars taught teachers about student-centred teaching methods but that teachers were unable to put these methods into practice for various reasons that were ignored by the organisers of the seminars. Farid argued that despite the ‘good content’ of the seminars, there was either no follow-up support for the teachers for the implementation of such methods or the content did not consider the reality of the context of the classrooms and was unrealistic.

Based on Farid’s observations, if we consider time, place, equipment, resources, students, teachers, methods, community, leadership, and resources as variables in improving the quality of education, perhaps the seminars considered only one or two of these variables (i.e. teachers and

methods) and ignored the rest. Therefore, although teachers in theory learned about how to teach effectively, the imbalance of other variables made it almost impossible for teachers to implement what they had learned. The result was that despite millions of dollars in aid spent on capacity-building workshops for teachers, the quality of education remained poor.

The parent participant, Sayeed, sympathised with the teachers, saying, “A class of 70 students is taught by one teacher for a period of 55 minutes each subject. The teacher doesn’t have even one minute for each student.”

Of course he explained that this was not what the teachers chose but what the system imposed on them despite the flow of millions of dollars in aid. He maintained that one could not expect the teachers to be able to know their students, as they had to deal with a large number of students and respond to irresponsible bureaucracy.

Sayeed, made a comparison between the salary of a teacher and that of a consultant to the Minister of Education or consultant of President Karzai, observing, “A teacher receives (equivalent of NZD 70) a month and a consultant of (President) Karzai receives (equivalent of NZD 7000) a month.”

He clarified that it is not that the government does not have enough money to increase teachers’ salaries, but that the money is spent in other ways that Sayeed described as ‘unnecessary’ like the payments to the President’s Afghan and international consultants. Sayeed’s solution was: “Reduce the number of your (President Karzai and the Minister of Education’s) consultants and increase the salaries of teachers.”

Baba talked about the status of teachers during the Taliban era, classifying them into three categories. One was the teachers who could afford to leave the country. They were usually some of the most qualified teachers. The second group of teachers were those with English



language skills. These teachers left schools and found jobs in international organisations. And the third group of teachers were those who could neither leave the country nor find jobs with international organisations. These teachers stayed in schools but had to take on another job like running a small business or doing some menial work to make ends meet. Baba's word to describe teachers' status during the Taliban era was 'disappointing'. He emphasised the harshness of living conditions for people, especially teachers, under the Taliban regime.

Baba also recalled the status of teachers during the king's reign, saying it was much higher at that time than it is now. He said that the government, families, and community leaders had great respect for teachers in general. Teachers had a voice and their authority was highly regarded.

### **5.3.2: Women's Lives**

The stories of Saboor, Farid, Bibi, Jamila, Hayedah, Baba, and Khadij illustrate that traditional beliefs, insecurity, and religious restrictions are the major obstacles facing Afghan women. According to them, the post-Taliban transition has made little impact in changing the role of women in society and the attitude towards them. While they appreciated some of the positive changes, such as the opening of schools for women and girls and women's participation in the political arena, nevertheless they said these were not sufficient to enable women to take leadership in their own lives as the traditional belief among many Afghan men is that women cannot be leaders. Saboor, Jamila, and Bibi pointed out that while a few women are in parliament and in other high-ranking positions in the government, millions of women and girls are severely oppressed by men.

Both the male and the female participants complained that women in Afghanistan have mostly been silenced and that women in general have hardly had a chance to exercise their rights

and privileges as humans and citizens in Afghanistan. Of all the participants, Saboor spoke most about the lives of women and the changes in their lives given that he had always been concerned about how this affected his daughters and his wife. Although women participants did talk about women's status, they said little compared to Saboor. I have learned that Afghan women tend to reveal little about themselves, a major reason being that historically most Afghan women have been traditionally represented by men. For example, it is still the tradition that when a young couple get married, the girl is not supposed to say 'yes' to her husband directly and in public. Instead, her father as her authorised person announces her agreement on her behalf. Such examples are true in many other aspects of women's lives in the Afghan community. It is therefore not surprising the women participants did not reveal much about themselves and about their perspectives towards women in general. Considering Afghanistan is a highly male-oriented country, Saboor's perspective on women is admirable especially since one of his main concerns about education relates to women's lives.

Saboor mentioned that tragedies such as women being accused of adultery and being stoned by their husbands or by other male family members, though rare, still happen. He called it 'barbaric, brutal, and inhuman'. Jamila and Bibi described forced marriages where young girls and even children are coerced into getting married against their will as "tragic". Khadij, on the other hand, said she had lost her youth hiding inside a 'chadori', and the only fun she had ever had in life was helping her students. She had devoted herself to serving her students and supporting her family. "My entire life has been spent at home, in school, and commuting between the two," she said.

A saying that Saboor expressed may explain much about the attitude of some highly conservative and traditional Afghans towards women and their education. That is "women must

be either at home or in the grave”. He pointed out that there are some people who believe that women must stay home all the time. When the Taliban ruled Afghanistan, they enforced this throughout the entire country. Almost all women stayed home during that time with no education and no work opportunities. Some women were stoned or shot dead by the Taliban perhaps for their outspokenness, Saboor remarked it was “unfortunate” that half of society (the women) were totally paralysed during Taliban rule. In his opinion the current voices of democracy and “rights of women” was tokenistic and women still did not have a voice. “The presence of women in this democratic movement is symbolic. A woman with five votes enters parliament. We must overcome this challenge.”

Saboor maintained that women should be given more opportunities. However, he emphasised that because women for the past four decades had been more deprived of their rights than men, the women in the government did not seem to be qualified enough for their positions. He mentioned ‘tokenistic’ to perhaps emphasise the necessity for more educational opportunities for women to enable them to engage more fully in the issues of the country.

Starting from the rule of the Mujahidin (1992-1995), according to Saboor women were seen as second-class citizens. “After the first victory of the Mujahidin, unveiling was equal to infidelity.” He described the conditions of women during the Taliban as “worst of all times”. According to Saboor, during the Taliban era discrimination against women was so severe that a woman was shot, and many were beaten by the Taliban. “So, how could we expect women to be promoted? The environment was not ready for women to grow.”

It can be understood from Saboor’s examples that although the tokenistic role of women in the current government may not necessarily be intentional government policy, it nevertheless carries the social problem of traditional beliefs within it. While he was critical of the

employment of a few women with little knowledge and skills in senior positions in the government, it could be that the government was trying to encourage more women to seek employment in the public sector. Saboor also noted that the aim of the West to ‘empower’ women through aid programmes had not been successful. “The rumours that women of Afghanistan have gained their rights and are engaged, is a Western political game,” he said.

Bibi, Khadij, Jamila, Hayedah, Baba, Farid, and Saboor all agreed that women in Afghanistan were still being denied their very basic human rights. They noted that few women were in decision-making positions, and the few in the government did not have much authority.

Saboor insisted that rather than for tribal or religious reasons, there had been a political motive for excluding women from education and work during the Taliban era, which was to maintain the status quo.

The current constriction on women’s lives was further illuminated by the contrasting stories shared by Saboor and Baba about life before the wars. They were the only participants who had experienced education during King Zahir Khan’s reign and the government of President Daud Khan, and they described the role of women during this era as progressive. “That was not tokenistic,” Saboor insisted. Their main argument was that what made women’s lives better during the king’s rule, was education. Education and the role of women in education played a crucial role in not only changing the status of women but also the perspectives of the ordinary people towards women. Both participants noted that at that time women teachers were respected and regarded as being extremely important. Although this was not true in remote rural areas, it is evident from Saboor and Baba’s accounts that the king’s reforms in the cities could have been extended to the rest of the country if he had been given the opportunity.

Saboor suggested that in order to measure the progress of women in the political arena, the government of President Daud Khan (1973-1978) would provide the best benchmark. According to both Baba and Saboor, in the 1960s and 1970s women who worked in the government had the authority to make decisions. Furthermore, the number of women and their ways of engagement in the government increased in a balanced way as more developments took place in the country. According to Baba and Saboor, during that era government policies relating to women were the best Afghanistan has experienced for the past few decades. To measure the progress of education, women's rights, and civil engagement, Saboor suggested that again President Daud's government would provide a reliable benchmark. The entire governmental and social system had regressed during the rule of the Mujahidin and Taliban, so he was frustrated by the current government's claims of progress. "The presence and engagement of women during Daud Khan's time was a progressive matter and it was growing. There was coeducation in that time and we studied and lived together like a family," he explained.

In addition to Baba and Saboor's first-hand accounts, Farid had done research on women's lives during the time of the king and President Daud. They were all in agreement on the progressive nature of the entire governmental system during President Daud's time, especially with respect to women's lives.

Saboor mentioned that educational opportunities for women had been growing during that time and helped the advancement of women in society. These stories suggest that even though Afghanistan was an Islamic country with a dynamic number of tribes then, it was nevertheless progressive. The system set up by President Daud gradually changed or was in the process of changing public opinion on women's education. Farid, Baba, and Saboor argued that the progressive reforms and policies of President Daud Khan's government indicated that

democracy and the promotion of women's rights was possible in Afghanistan. Saboor and Baba suggested that because a system existed and rule of law was observed, religion was also interpreted more moderately at that time. Saboor, Baba, Bahar, and Farid claimed that religion was used as a tool by the Mujahidin and the Taliban later on to manipulate people's minds so they could enforce their ideologies.

In sum, the experiences and perspectives of the participants indicate that many conservative traditional beliefs such as forced marriage are still adhered to in most parts of Afghanistan. The participants insisted that women have limited options in society compared to men. The general attitude of the public towards women is that they are incapable of undertaking large tasks when it comes to economy, politics, and social affairs. It might be fair to state that women are still treated as second-class citizens in Afghanistan.

However, despite these social challenges in the country, the participants believed it was possible to change conditions for women, but first the attitude towards women and the way women were seen in society needed to change through education. Although the Mujahidin and Taliban regimes made such change in attitudes more difficult, the participants were optimistic that Afghanistan could learn from the progressive times of the king and President Daud when there had been good opportunities for women to progress.

### **5.3.3: Pedagogy and Curriculum**

The participants who were most involved with teaching and learning practices were teacher activists Baba, Jamila, and Bibi; parent activist Sayeed; and public intellectuals Farid and Bahar. They all agreed that the predominant methods of learning were memorisation and content coverage, which they saw as a constriction on both what was being learned, and how it was being learned. Sayeed's perspective was that 'practical learning' was opposite to 'memorisation'

and that ‘practical learning’ could help his children learn and grow. Sayeed wanted to see that the education schools offered his children made a difference in their lives and would make them grow. Memorisation, he emphasised, would not enable his daughters to relate their school studies to their everyday life experiences. “In Afghanistan, there is still no practical learning; just memorisation. My daughters do not know what a verb or a subject is but they memorise them.”

Sayeed’s expectation for school was not just his children becoming literate and learning how to read and write but also for schools to help them grow psychologically and emotionally to enable them to face life’s realities and challenges.

To Sayeed, a productive method to learn and grow was for his children to ask questions of themselves and of their parents. Because of his belief that his children were unable to address those questions at school, he let his children ask him questions which he saw as beneficial for their learning and curiosity. With some obvious anger and passion, Sayeed protested, “Why do they (educational authorities) waste my children’s time? Why do they weaken my children’s courage?”

Besides Sayeed, Bahar also criticised the current teaching and learning practices. He emphasised that an education system should teach students how to think and how to become creative so they can distinguish good from bad. Bahar was concerned with the poor quality of education in schools while Sayeed was concerned with the poor content in the textbooks. Both participants mentioned that they spent a few hours each week helping their children understand how the lessons they learned in schools could have real-life applications. “The quality of education is very poor,” Bahar said. “A child can’t even write a simple letter. Nothing about (individual) life and social life is taught to children in schools.”

Bahar, like Sayeed, also wants to see that education is, in fact, making a difference in his children's lives. For their children to be able to read and write was a matter of significance to both of them but not as significant as the education having relevance in the personal and social growth of their children.

Farid, on the other hand, argued that 'the student' was still regarded as a minor part of the education system and had yet to become a major part of it. Farid claimed that there were many high school graduates who were not sufficiently literate to be able to write an informal letter to a friend let alone a formal one to an official. He emphasised that because the infrastructure in schools had broken down, it would take a long time for them to teach students about their human essence and how they could become more conscious beings through learning. Farid observed that for the past few decades there had been no "thoughtful and systematic" view of education in Afghanistan. Based on his own experience of schooling, he noted, "in the textbooks, except for a few handpicked poems that did not really convey any meaning, we did not find anything else".

He emphasised the significance of critical thinking, and his thoughts are well articulated in the work of Goodman (2008):

For all teachers, assisting in the development of the knowledge, dispositions, and skills of critical thinking may be the most valuable of the contributions they can imbue upon their students regardless of the specific subject matter at hand (p. 36)

Farid argued that much of the content is taught in abstract and that students gain little knowledge at school as a result of such abstract learning and teaching. The same way that two plus two makes four and there can be no argument about that, everything else that comes from the teacher is non-negotiable. Farid used the words 'old heritage' to illustrate that teachers themselves studied that same way and that attitude has been accepted in schools with few people critiquing that.



As previously noted, he was very concerned with the lack of transparency and corruption in the system, noting that while many qualified educationists in the country were jobless, some traditional minds still controlled education. His conclusion was that Afghans were “making fun of education” and that mere memorisation of some poems and formulas would not lead to learning and therefore would not lead the country anywhere. Farid looked at education from a more theoretical perspective. Unlike Sayeed, who blamed everything on the educational authorities, Farid looked at the status of education through a broader lens. He not only acknowledged the negative contribution of family and community to the poor quality of education in schools but also the failure of civil service unions and teacher unions to be more proactive. Sayeed’s perspectives came from a more emotional standpoint while Farid’s thoughts were rooted more in his views on education. Both of them, though, expressed similar concerns about education.

Although the school principals, Jamila and Bibi, tried to reflect all the positive aspects of what went on in their schools as a result of their work, both of them mentioned content coverage and memorisation as problems. Jamila noted that in a classroom with 90 students and one teacher, it is hard to use any other methods that would give students a chance to express themselves and take part in discussions. Bibi said her teachers do what they can to address individual learning needs of students and that it was not always an easy task. “With the very small salaries that our teachers receive, they already do so much. I can’t expect more from them but I know they do their best.”

The participants’ experiences and stories about how content coverage and memorisation prevent students from engagement and critical thinking inside classrooms give weight to the argument that in the education system there are dominating forces that negatively influence

many aspects of education. A focus on content coverage and memorisation is a powerful tool used by these dominant forces to keep students and teachers passive and disengage them from matters that affect their lives and those of their community. Therefore, the use of such methods in schools plays a role in the maintenance of the status quo in favour of these dominating forces so that their ideologies and power remain unquestioned.

#### **5.3.4: Students' Lives**

War disrupted the education of many Afghans. Millions of Afghan people left the country and migrated to other countries, especially to neighbouring Iran and Pakistan. These immigrant Afghans found it extremely hard to integrate into the communities of these countries because of a lack of infrastructure and limited resources there, as well as the negative attitude of these neighbour states towards Afghan citizens. With the help of the UN, refugee camps were provided for these Afghans where their children got a chance to attend refugee schools. Later these camps were politicised with the formation of groups of warlords who then politicised the educational curriculum and taught ideologies of jihad in the schools.

In this study, dislocation, resulting in the disruption of the students' learning process, and life in the refugee camps illustrate how the participants' lives and educational experiences were constricted. The stories of two participants who studied in neighbouring Iran in refugee camps reflect their views on the nature of Afghan education outside Afghanistan during these decades.

Saboor noted that because the Afghan children in Iran and Pakistan did not have the same rights and privileges as children native to those nations, the Afghan children had to attend refugee schools, which were controlled by the jihadi parties and had no educational standards. It was his view that these jihadi schools and institutions mostly prepared the children to join jihadi groups later in their youth. "They called them schools and pretended that they cared for the

children. This movement did not grow children's education neither their potentials. When the children reached their 20s, they were filled with jihad ideology, and this was a tragic loss of thought for those who really wanted to learn something. Such pressures (on children) were common both in Iran and in Pakistan (Afghan refugee camps)," he said.

Saboor's perspectives on conditions in the refugee schools and the discrimination against Afghan children in the neighbouring countries were supported by Hayedah and Bahar who received their education in Iran. Hayedah was more fortunate than many Afghan children in Iran. With the help of her Iranian neighbour, her parents managed to enrol her in an Iranian school.

Hayedah's story reveals how critical the job of a teacher is, and how great an impact the words of a primary school teacher can have on a student throughout life. The student-teacher relationship can be damaged and the student's emotions deeply hurt if a teacher discriminates against a student because of his or her financial standing. Children's emotions seem to last potentially throughout their lives. Hayedah said that from the day she was discriminated against she chose to isolate herself from her Iranian classmates.

"I was always around other Afghan girls. I kept my distance from the Iranians. They discriminated. All of them discriminated, including the authorities."

Whether or not Hayedah was aware that the teachers and students were discriminating against her because of her different nationality, she experienced the bitterness of not being treated equally. "They encouraged other students. They did not encourage Afghan students," she said.

Because of such discrimination, Hayedah chose to mix with the few other Afghan children attending that school. "My only friends in Iran were Afghans," she said.

Another participant whose education was disrupted and had to leave the country with his family was the public intellectual, Bahar. He shared a similar experience where with support from the local Iranian community he was able to attend a school for Iranian children. “Our Iranian neighbours helped me get into school,” he said.

Bahar was able to complete his education to high-school level but not to tertiary level because he was a refugee. His experience was different from those of other participants who had been educated outside Afghanistan. He said that because he was an immigrant, there were limitations for him and he did not enjoy most of the privileges that native children had. He recalled that when an event was organised, there was little chance of the Afghan children taking part. “I was not happy. Immigrants were looked on as rubbish there (in Iran). We were regarded as second-class citizens. Because we (Afghans) were denied equal rights, we worked even harder to prove them (Iranians) wrong.”

Bahar mentioned that although Iran welcomed the Afghans who sought refuge there, most Iranians were not happy to host Afghans. One reason was that Afghan people provided cheap labour and so limited the employment opportunities for native Iranians. Bahar saw this as being related to identity and said that as a dislocated person he had issues with his identity. While at school he was identified as an Afghan and seemed have been discriminated against as well. He explained that identity had been a significant challenge for him. “I had two identities; my Afghani identity at home, and outside home trying to look Iranian.”

Bahar said this identity conflict gave him the most the pain while a refugee. In public he pretended to be an Iranian so he would not be insulted or discriminated against. He now wished he could have gone through childhood with only one identity; his Afghan identity. Bahar further

elaborated on why he tried to hide his Afghan identity: “When Iranians tried to scare their children, they would tell them, ‘Don’t go out, Afghans will kidnap you! They will kill you.’”

Bahar recalled his experience of sectarian discrimination: “One day I was sitting inside a classroom when one of our religious teachers came in and asked if there was anyone from the Sunni Muslims. I was the only Sunni there and I was afraid to raise my hand and tell him that. I was silent. He started insulting the caliphs of the Sunni Muslims. It was not a happy experience.”

Bahar’s story illustrates how political and religious ideologies constricted his life as a refugee and disrupted his learning. From these experiences Bahar came to realise that regardless of the extent of diversity in a nation, favouring or opposing one religion or a specific section of a religion by teachers and schools is harmful to students with different beliefs. His religious teacher in primary school had hurt him by insulting the Sunni Muslim caliphs in front of other students. However, now at tertiary level, Bahar appreciated debates on any subject including religion, and he fully respected peoples’ choices in this regard. He decided to unlearn what he had been taught and the way he had been taught in his childhood.

Bahar concluded by expressing appreciation for the help given him by those Iranian neighbours, and condemning the discrimination he had suffered at the hands of many others. “I felt very down when the teachers discriminated against me.”

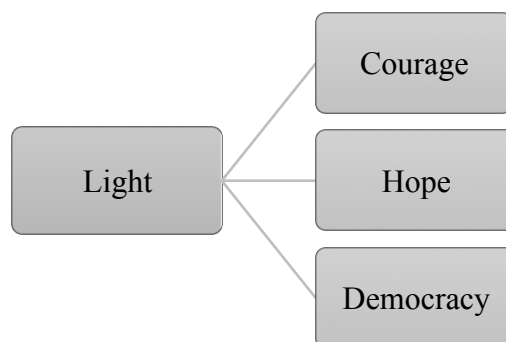
Hayeda and Bahar’s experience as refugees in Iran reveal the difficulties and challenges they faced in pursuing their education. It also indicates the significant value of their homeland in shaping their identity. Both Hayeda and Bahar transmuted their negative experiences into positive attitudes towards education and particularly children’s education. The discriminations claimed by the participants did not necessarily impact only negatively on Afghan students. Both

Hayedah and Bahar shared stories of how they had been motivated by discrimination against them to work harder and do better

#### 5.4: Light

I was not surprised to find signs of hope in the stories of the participants, as people of Afghanistan have proved to be resilient throughout history. Light as an overarching theme is a metaphor that emerges in the narratives of the participants as an outcome they pursue in their journey of activism. It is common among Afghan people to believe and say ‘every darkness is pregnant with light’. For Afghan people who have been suffering for many years, light is a source of inspiration and hope. The belief of many Afghans that every darkness ends with light encourages them to move forward despite struggles and difficulties. Similarly the participants of this study were hopeful that the ‘dark shadow’ that has covered education will lead to light. While ‘dark shadow’ illustrates how Afghan education is oppressed, ‘light’ presents a desire for a ‘liberated’ education for these participants. They desire a liberated education that will promote social justice, peace, and prosperity in Afghanistan. As shown in **Figure 5**, three terms that manifest ‘light’ in the stories of the participants are: 1) Courage, a virtue that enables them to confront fear; 2) Hope, as an inspiration for the participants to move forward with their educational activism; and 3) Democracy, being able to lead to a stable and democratic Afghanistan if problematised and contextualised, and then taught to children in schools.

Figure 5: *Light*



### 5.4.1: Courage

Culturally, many children in Afghanistan are encouraged to believe that they are not able to confront difficulties and that every time they face a challenge they need to enlist the help of adults. While many developed courage mostly in their adulthood, Baba, the teacher activist, dared as a young child to fight for his own education and defy the traditional beliefs of his community and his father. The narratives that Sayeed and Bahar shared suggest that fear takes courage away from the students. Their stories indicate that it is the absence of courage in their children that results in their disengagement inside classrooms.

Hayedah's perspectives as a teacher, on the other hand, resonate with the desire of the parent participants Bahar and Sayeed. She too noted that the students needed to have the freedom and courage to express what goes on in their minds. Her own experience at primary school where her teacher warned her not to inform her mother about what went on in school, affected her courage and increased her fear inside the classroom. Years later she translated that experience into positive motivation as a primary school teacher by doing the opposite. She said that she encouraged her students to ask questions, though such an attitude, she explained, is not common among other teachers.

Besides Hayedah, Farid also mentioned his views on courage. Farid argued that the mystical poets like Rumi, Jami, Avicenna, and several others who challenged the totalitarian views of the religious and political oppressors of their times proved that through courage, ordinary people could confront the oppressive forces imposed upon them. He argued that these mystics in their time introduced a new era in humanities literature that might offer valuable insights in freeing schools from fear. He recited a verse by Rumi,

اینکه گویی این کنم یا آن کنم، خود دلیل اختیار است ای صنم

The fact that you claim, I will do this or I will do that, means that you have the power to choose; the power to make a decision.

Or,

بیرون ز تو نیست هر آنچه در عالم هست

در خود بطلب هر آنچه خواهی که تویی

Everything in the universe is within you

Seek what you want inside thyself.

Farid insisted that confronting fear in the education system and promoting courage was possible through the integration of the existing mystical literature in the national curriculum. He named several Afghan philosophers as well as Western pedagogics whose work, he maintained, could contribute to promoting change. According to him, the Afghan philosophers illustrate the significance of concepts such as; freedom, unity, respect, tolerance, and many other positive characteristics that he believed could eliminate the dominating force of fear inside classrooms if integrated into the curriculum.

#### **5.4.2: Hope**

Hope manifested as a ‘light’ in the narratives of the participants in their struggle for the humanisation of education. The concept ‘hope’ underpins the reasons and aspirations of the narrators for resisting the status quo and fighting for change. Hope does not, however, reflect a strategy or a plan but a motivation for struggle and resistance. It illustrates how participants’ desire to promote peace, development, and democracy inspire them to believe in reforming the education system and to struggle for its achievement.



Teacher activists Khadij and Hayedah mentioned that their greatest motivation for teaching was their hope for the children's future. They emphasised that perhaps few teachers teach merely to earn a salary. Teachers are perhaps among the lowest paid professionals in the country. They maintained that, for many educators, teaching was their love as it was for them. Khadij and Hayedah argued that in conflict-riven Afghanistan, hope is a crucial drive. Hope is like an energy that drives people towards their dreams and as a manifestation of light that gets them through the darkness and promises light at the end of the tunnel. Of course hope without purposeful action is a daydream. It is evident in Khadij and Hayedah's narratives that their light of hope is fuelled by their activism through their teaching jobs.

Hope in the narratives of other participants was expressed in different ways. For example, for the public intellectual, Farid, hope existed in learning from the mystical poets to reform Afghan education. He suggested that the integration of the mystical philosophies and theories of Afghans from the past and the incorporation of the mystical poems could improve the quality of education. He argued that these philosophies could help children recognise their inner potentials and learn about their responsibilities as human beings to contribute towards a better future.

Farid's argument was not that mystical philosophers such as Rumi offer literary knowledge around the concept of hope. His hope was that those in charge of education would acknowledge the philosophies of those mystical poets and integrate them to improve the quality of education. At one point I asked Farid about what could motivate some of the poorest people in the country to care for their children's education. He indicated that despite extreme poverty, their hope for a better future for their children had turned people into strong souls. He described how poverty or war could kill male members of a family, but nevertheless the women would come forward and do whatever it took to give their children an education. This is supported by Sayeed

and Baba's narratives about some of the poorest people they knew who demonstrated extraordinary dedication to educating themselves and their children.

Teacher activist Baba also spoke of hope. While Farid's hope centred on the mystical knowledge and learning of notable scholars and poets, Baba brought an historical lens to it and observed that hope had been alive in past decades in Afghanistan. As noted previously, Baba received his primary education during King Zahir Khan's reign in the 1950s, and his tertiary education during the government of President Daud Khan. He believed that great lessons could be learned from what he called 'the golden times' of these leaders. Baba saw hope in looking back a few decades and incorporating lessons that could be learned from the 1960s and 1970s to reform today's education.

Another sign of hope is the way Baba kept sending his children to school in the Taliban era even though they were learning nothing of use. "I knew that my children would not learn anything at school. Still I sent them to school so they'd continue this journey of education."

Baba said he knew the Taliban would not remain forever and that it was important for his children to continue to develop the habit of going to school, even if they did not learn anything then. He kept alive the hope that one day the Taliban era would be over and his children would have a chance to gain a better education.

Baba's prediction came true. The Taliban were ousted in 2002 and school doors were opened again to girls. "Because many people, especially the girls in the families, were deprived of this right (to be educated), they all rushed to school. We have classrooms with 70 to 80 students in one class. The number of students entering school is so high that the government is unable to support them."

He argued that people understood that only through education was a better future possible for their children. His comment about people's rush to school resonates with the perspectives of other participants about the Afghans' thirst for education and their hopes and desires for the future.

Apart from Baba's efforts to help his oldest son pursue his graduate studies in Japan, and to encourage his daughter to pursue her graduate studies in Europe, he also helped several other children get an education. Providing poor children with stationery despite his own poverty indicates that hope brings about generosity and empathy. Baba was too humble to mention that he too was making a significant contribution, and attributed all the good changes to the youth. "Despite all disappointments, when I see active young men and women, hope blooms in my heart and enlightens it. This makes me hopeful for the future."

The public intellectual, Saboor, illustrated hope in a different way. His hope was that through better governance and leadership it was possible to improve the quality of education. He suggested the education system during King Zahir Shah's reign in the sixties and President Daud Khan's government in the seventies were good models of progressive education systems from which the current and future educational leaders could learn. He gave an example of what made education different during those times saying, "After all, students who liked science would start that with love and interest. You know well that in addition to talent, interest is very important."

Saboor was also hopeful that the number of teachers travelling to other countries for educational purposes would help improve the quality of education once they returned to the country. He said when villagers are asked what their needs are, one of their first requests is for a school. This attitude was not imported from the west, he emphasised. He shared a personal story: "I know of villages where people collected money from residents and built a school. In the cities

like Herat, education finds its place very easily. There are families who sponsor children from poor families and send them to school. There are thousands of families who have great love for and interest in education.”

Another example of hope was apparent in the story of Hayedah and how her parents supported her under difficult circumstances. Her parents left the country in order for their children to gain an education and pursue their dreams. She elaborated on her passion for learning since childhood, the full story of which is presented in Chapter 4. “When we were refugees, I spent most of my time reading. I am a reader and I love it. I do not have good memories of that time as a refugee. Teachers did not treat the immigrants well. However, I had one good teacher who encouraged me a lot and I always remember her.”

Her parents’ attention and her teacher’s encouragement made an impact on her, and her passion for education inspired her to learn despite the difficulties her parents had to deal with as refugees. Hayedah’s story indicates that neither the extremist ideologies of the Taliban, nor the closure of schools, nor the difficulties her family faced as refugees, stopped her from learning.

“When the Taliban came, school doors were closed on girls. My mom said, ‘We will go back to Iran so our children can start school.’ As refugees, when my parents realised how bad Afghan schools (in Iran) were, they hired private teachers for me.”

Hayedah added that although she was very sad about being separated from her classmates when the Taliban shut school doors, she kept contact with some of them by going to their houses and secretly sharing books with them.

As a refugee Hayedah said that she worked hard to prove herself worthy and to prove the negative perceptions towards her were wrong. After she and her family returned to Afghanistan in the post-Taliban era, she continued her schooling. “As soon as we returned from Iran, my

mom took me to school. I walked all around the school and counted the bullet marks on the trees.”

Every girl who returned to school after the Taliban era, according to Hayedah, felt reborn - like a prisoner feels when breathing fresh air outside after being six years behind bars. At a young age, Hayedah learned what it meant to be discriminated against, and to be punished for being born in another country, and because of her gender. Her experiences taught her about self-worth, the value of identity, and the importance of hopefulness. “In school (after the Taliban) the teachers encouraged us a lot. That time I started to love the idea of becoming a teacher. It is a noble job.”

Hayedah transformed those bitter childhood emotions into the positive energy of love for her profession. “I have a great relationship with children. Even when I feel bad at home, when I enter school I forget everything. My world changes and I enjoy school. Children are pure, honest, and frank.”

She added that today when she feels down, whether in the community or with her own family, the only place that gives her joy is at school with the children, delighting in their purity, honestly, and frankness. Similarly, her activism did not seem to come from a professional perspective per se but more from an emotional standpoint rooted in her love and hope for children. Perhaps that personal motive energised her to fight for what she believed was the right education for children. Hayedah said that she did everything she could for her school to become independent. She dreamed of a day her school would have all its own books written by Afghans themselves.

Sayeed, the parent activist, shared a similar hope. While he strongly expressed his dissatisfaction with the government, his heart seemed to be filled with hope and passion for a

better future for his daughters. Although I asked him to talk about his own educational experience, he soon directed the story towards his daughters' education. He said he helped his children with their education on a regular basis and he gave them money to save for their future studies after high school so that they could study outside Afghanistan. Sayeed's desire to see his daughters continue their graduate studies abroad, showed he was a liberal thinker in the context of Herat, a city where some traditionalists think girls and women should not travel by themselves. In his aspirations for his children, Sayeed may represent the views of many parents in Afghanistan who wish to see their children excel through education. His support for his children indicates that if perhaps the education department had a strategy to engage parents in schooling issues, many parents would be willing to communicate and support schools. Sayeed hoped that even if Afghanistan did not provide opportunities for his daughters to serve the country through their professions in the future, they could serve beyond its borders. "If my daughter becomes an engineer, even if tomorrow she would not be of use in Afghanistan, she could be of use to other countries in the world," he said.

It can be deduced that even if Sayeed lost hope for the future of Afghanistan, he would not lose hope for the future of his daughters, and believed they would excel and make a contribution to the world. Sayeed was a good example of a religious person who was liberal at the same time. He said he wanted to help his children understand that religion was not an obstacle for them, but it encouraged them to learn and serve others. "My daughters must become responsible people. From an Islamic perspective I tell my daughters that when you learn, God will like you. I tell them that Islam says, learn. I do everything I can so their studies will become effective."

Sayeed was humble enough to indicate that he was not the only one who was so passionate about his children's education. He mentioned that he knew some extremely poor people who did everything they could to send their children to school and help them get an education. Sayeed said that he knew a girl who travelled 20km daily to the city to get an education. "Even the poorest people send their children to school despite a thousand difficulties in their way."

He also insisted that he knew many other parents who were willing to support education if they were provided with the means and the motivation by the educational authorities. "A large majority of people is willing to serve the country. The problem is that we do not have good leadership. For many, helping education is a dream."

Sayeed explained that he had a strong network of people whose desires and dreams were to help children get an education. He argued that one of the reasons for the peoples' inspiration was their suffering during the war and realising that with better education the country could be at peace. According to him despite the difficulties and lack of support from the government, some parents tried to make a difference. However, the government's lack of attention and its failed leadership had become an excuse for many parents, who did not seem to work in a more organised and productive way.

In sum, hope, as a concept, term, and a metaphor, appeared in the narratives of the participants as a motivation to move on from the decades of war, turmoil, and the oppressive forces that constricted peoples' lives. The similarities in the thoughts and perspectives of the public intellectuals, parents, and teacher activists about the need for change in education suggest that there is a desire for a kind of education that can help children develop to their highest

potential, and that these activists seem to be acting upon that desire. These stories are indications that parents value education and are aware of its importance for their children.

### **5.4.3: Democracy**

“Democracy is not a wild mushroom that grows in one night.”

- Farid, activist participant

The concept of democracy was the third aspect of ‘light’ described by the participants, and reflects their perspectives about what they thought of democracy in relation to education and why democracy is one of the most contested terms in the current discourse of Afghanistan.

Their narratives reveal that the democratic transition in the post-Taliban period faces significant challenges. Corruption in the Afghan government and the mistakes of the international community in ignoring the roots of terrorism in the region and only fighting elements of terrorism inside Afghanistan, has led to the death of thousands of ordinary Afghan people. The public activists, Farid, Omid, and Saboor, pointed out that the same way that the warlords used religion as a means to achieve their ideological goals in the 1990s, today the same warlords have gained more power under the name of democracy in the post-Taliban period. Saboor explained that although they ignored the voices of millions of ordinary people, the warlords and tribal leaders received millions of dollars to promote democracy from international donors through their private organisations. As a result of such misuse of the concept of democracy, it became one of the most contested terms in the country, and the concept even turned into a joke among local Afghans. The parent activist Sayeed said that it was common among ordinary people when they hear of issues that have gone wrong in the country, to say, ‘it’s a democracy; anything can happen in a democracy’.

The activist participants believed in democracy as a system in which people would have a voice in the government and would select their representatives in the government. They argued



that in a democracy, equality, equity, and the rule of law would be able to develop. However, they insisted that the values of democracy must be taught to the masses through educational programmes and schools to provide a foundation for its development. Saboor, Omid, and Farid insisted that democracy could be taught and learned by people. As noted above, Farid used the metaphor ‘wild mushroom’ to emphasise that it takes a long time for democracy to flourish in a country. Although he insisted that a liberal or Western democracy could not work in Afghanistan, he argued that Afghanistan was ready for an organic democracy that took into account contextual realities. To him organic meant a localised democracy. He asserted that a democracy should be based on the understanding of the context and realities of Afghanistan.

Farid, however, shed light on the history of democracy in Afghanistan to clarify his perspective about why it takes time to be established. He gave the example of how King Amanullah had tried to bring democracy in a hurry and had failed. “As soon as Amanullah returned from France, he asked all women to unveil. He forced his own wife to unveil. People could stand that situation for only two years.”

He argued that while King Amanullah’s visit to Europe inspired him to make Afghanistan like Europe, he did not truly understand the differences between the two contexts. He suggested that lessons could be learned from King Amanullah’s failed scheme and the concept should not be discarded.

“He (the king) told people to wear suits, and instead of saying ‘Salaam’ (hello), they should bow to each other. A poor guy would wear a suit over his traditional Afghani garments. This was just the appearance of democracy that he had learned.”

Farid argued that the king had not realised that a democracy that worked in one country might not work in another. He insisted that Afghans and the international community should

learn much from the king's failed experience. He maintained that the decade of an organic democracy started in the 1950s during King Zahir Khan's reign. He said King Zahir Khan had ruled Afghanistan for 40 years and had implemented this process slowly step-by-step. He reflected on his grandmother's experience who had lived during that time and noted that the king had started the changes with his own family and his government. People gradually started to learn by example. The king demonstrated democracy in his own family and did not force people to change anything, Farid asserted. In the 1960s people in the modern cities of Afghanistan like Kabul, had a lifestyle similar to that in the West.

This lifestyle had grown gradually and the public had not shown any significant negative reaction to it.

For Farid, a product of democracy is citizenship. He argued that neither democracy nor citizenship have found their place in Afghanistan. He averred that in Afghanistan, human rights and civil society are all like "games for gaining power".

A Western style democracy, Farid argued, was not a good match with people's values. Therefore, he commented that a democracy should grow organically in the country, which could be a time-consuming process that required great patience and work. To Farid, the democratic transition in the post-Taliban era was a model of a Western democracy. To him in a Western democracy, the rights of an ordinary citizen and the rights of a president of a country are the same. In his view in a Western democracy, there are absolute equal shares of citizenship rights. However, he argued that in a 'third-world democracy' a certain degree of authority must be given to the arbab (leader) of a village, but that in order to ensure that he would not abuse his power, he must be kept accountable to the constitution of the country. He argued that if the arbab was only allowed the same authority as the ordinary villager, it would bring chaos as the arbab

would not agree and the ordinary person would not know how to use his rights properly. Farid concluded that adhering to the rule of law was essential and a prerequisite for the practice of democratic values in Afghan society.

The public intellectual Omid also believed that democratic values such as equality, citizenship rights and responsibilities, and respect should be taught in schools. Omid criticised the democratic post-Taliban transition as being ‘premature’. When I asked him about his impression of the current democratic process, he recited the following poem in Persian. The literal translation of this poem into English may not make much sense. However, I’ve tried to record it as I read it in Persian.

بزیر دیگ کبر و خودشناسی

بسوزد شعلهء مکر سیاسی

درون دیگ اما خون مردم

و اینست معنیء دموکراسی

Under the pot of arrogance and selfishness

May the flames of political deceit burn

Inside the pot is the blood of the people

This is the meaning of ‘democracy’

Omid was not happy with the democratic process. He linked democracy in Afghanistan to decision-making that oppressed people. Although he emphasised that he believed in a democratic country, it nevertheless had to be a democracy that was rooted in the values and principles of the Afghan people and not a democracy that was foreign to the country. Omid, described democracy as an imposed concept by some arrogant and selfish people to deceive ordinary Afghans. He used the metaphor of a pot filled with people’s blood to describe

democracy perhaps in reference to the many civilians, including women, children, and foreign and Afghan soldiers who had lost their lives in the post-Taliban democratic process. Omid concluded his thoughts hoping that schools could one day promote a more organic democracy that would work for Afghanistan.

Both Omid and Farid expressed similar concerns about the post-Taliban democratic process. Neither of them criticised the notion of democracy as a governance system, but rather as a transitional process in the post-Taliban era. While Farid attempted to examine democracy through a more professional lens, and supported his claims by elaborating on the history of democracy in Afghanistan, Omid contended with his poems about democracy. However, both activist participants agreed that democracy could be taught in schools and that it should be taught. They both emphasised the importance of people being educated about the values of democracy prior to the practical application of democracy in war-torn Afghanistan.

Besides Omid and Farid, the public intellectual, Saboor, described the current democracy and women's rights movement as symbolic. Like Farid and Omid, Saboor also shared his impression of the impact of democracy on education. None of these participants critiqued the concept of democracy as a system or school of thought, but decided to share their impression of the impact of the democratic process on education. I did not ask them to share their perspectives about the concept of democracy or the theory of democracy either. First, because it was clear that talking about the consequences of the democratic process post-Taliban was more important to them than problematising democracy as a concept. Second, as a native Afghan who grew up there, I am well aware that if I asked them such a question and they were not able to answer because of their limited knowledge, it would put them in an uncomfortable position. Despite the complexities and generalisations in the way Saboor viewed democracy he also argued that

education could play an integral role in institutionalising democracy in Afghanistan. He also emphasised the need to implement the rule of law as a precondition to introducing democracy in the country.

Besides the three public intellectuals, the parent activist Sayeed also shared his perspectives on democracy. His views were that democracy was a new phenomenon in Afghanistan and there were still some people who thought democracy was freedom with no limitations. This agrees with Farid's observations on the issue. To Sayeed, a democratic government was one whose legitimacy was based on votes, empowered people and was not a dictatorship. According to him the government had the role of a ship's captain, meaning that all others followed the government. At one point in his story he said, "It is the government that directs the nation. People vote and choose a president to direct them."

Sayed's critique of the Western model of democracy was not very different from that of Farid's and Saboor's. "They just came in and injected a word called democracy without the (Afghan) people knowing what democracy was."

In Sayeed's view of the ideal, "democracy should grow from schools and universities. That is only possible when a student can freely express her opinion. Not like today's dictatorship where the teacher says things and the students memorise everything." Sayeed's belief was that democracy could be learned and the best place to learn it was in schools and universities; a belief shared by the public intellectuals Farid, Omid, and Saboor as well. Sayeed's understanding of democracy was when people could express themselves and their beliefs freely and without fear.

Other points all participants agreed on about why a Western democracy would not function in Afghanistan were; the high rate of illiteracy, people's traditional beliefs, and the

significant differences between the Western and Afghanistan contexts in terms of accepted values and beliefs.

## **5.5: Conclusion**

This chapter unpacked and examined significant themes and concepts which arose throughout this study illustrating the most important and major perspectives and concerns of the Afghan educational activists. The key themes were: dark shadow, constriction, and light. Under the theme ‘dark shadow’, participants expressed their concerns and thoughts about the oppressive forces that manifest in forms of fear, subservience, and corruption. Their concerns and perspectives suggested that political ideology, religious ideology, and materialism were the faces of ‘dark shadow’ that affected schools. These perspectives clarified how they contribute to the passive role of teachers and students. Under the theme ‘constriction and disruption’, participants expressed their perspectives about how the educational curriculum and pedagogy have been constricted due to the decades of war and the negative impacts of it on students’ learning. Meanwhile, they expressed their concerns about how teachers’ lives, and women’s lives have been particularly disrupted and constricted during the war and post-war era. The theme ‘light’ manifested the courage, hope, and aspirations of the participants to strive and believe in a peaceful and democratic future for the Afghan people. They shared their views about how education could contribute towards an organic and suitable democracy for the country.

The themes ‘dark shadow’ and ‘constriction and disruption’ and their manifestations in schools and in the lives of students, teachers, and women, illustrated a process of what Freire calls ‘dehumanisation’ of these oppressed groups by the oppressors (Freire, 1996). In other words ‘dark shadow’ and ‘constriction and disruption’ illustrated an intentional strategy of the oppressor to silence the masses and impose passive roles upon them. As Freire states,

For as the people emerge into a state of awareness, they discover that the elite regard them with contempt (as vulgar, innately inferior); in reaction, they tend whenever possible to respond aggressively. The elite, in return, frightened at the threat to the legitimacy of their power, attempt by force or by paternalism to silence and domesticate the masses (Freire, 1994, p. 32).

The theme ‘light’, however, illustrated the hopes and aspirations of the participants for ‘humanisation’ of education and, therefore, the society through education. This theme manifested the courage of the activist participants in struggling against the status quo with the hope of inspiring more people to problematise democracy and work towards an Afghanistan that was democratic, developed, prosperous, and peaceful. Freire’s belief about the type of education that empowers masses was demonstrated in the hope and aspirations of these participants. Freire states,

“Only an education facilitating the passage from naive to critical transitivity, increasing men’s ability to perceive the challenges of their time, could prepare the people to resist the emotional power of transition (Freire, 1994, p. 32).”

Though it is evident that the activist participants do not possess all the answers to the challenges that Afghan education faces, they seem to strive to build coalitions and inspire more people and in particular the youth to work towards a more humanised education. These activist participants signal hope and demonstrate the possibilities by trying to raise awareness in their communities of how the mechanism of oppression works within schools and why activism is necessary to challenge and change such a mechanism.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

#### **6.1: Introduction**

Millions of girls and boys rushed into schools after the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. International donors and the UN launched campaigns to support schools and achieved significant success. Over a decade later, however, the quality of education remained an extraordinary challenge and schools remained passive in their social role of contributing to the economic, social, and political regrowth of the nation. While reviewing the reports from the Afghan Ministry of Education (MoE), the UN and the international donors, I observed that neither the voice nor the concerns of the local Afghan educational activists were addressed by these reports. Most of these reports focused on the increase in the number of students, teachers, and school buildings post Taliban. Perhaps the implicit intention behind these reports on the numeric data provided by the MoE and the international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) has been to justify the use of the multi-million dollars of aid money spent on education after the collapse of the Taliban in 2002.

To put forth the voice of the locals, I used online web blogs, social media pages, and my connections back home to identify the locals who were critically engaged in education. I identified a group of individuals who not only raised their concerns about the poor quality of education and challenged the status quo but also claimed to stand for the voices of the many voiceless ordinary people. A shared perspective of these individuals was their dissatisfaction with the status quo and their struggle to make sense of what a reformed and humanised education could look like. In this study I examined the voices of these individuals (Afghan educational activists) working in the current context of Afghanistan. The data for this research came through



two lenses. An inside school lens that represented the voices of the teacher activists, and an outer lens that represented the voices of the public intellectuals and parent activists.

## **6.2: Thesis Summary**

Chapter 1 described the statement of the problem, the purpose of the research, its significance, and my inspiration and role as a researcher. Chapter 2 examined and presented a summary of selected literature on Afghan education. It shed light on the history of Afghanistan with a focus on the changes in education since the 1960s. This chapter also elaborated the existing local knowledge and presented Rumi's philosophy as a local lens that offered a culturally resonant philosophy, one that the participants drew on to suggest solutions for the future of Afghan education. Chapter 3 described the methodological approaches to this study. This chapter presented the overall process used for initiating, implementing, and writing this research project. It also elaborated my epistemological position aligned with that of social constructivism (D. D. V. Fisher, 1991), which contributed to my choice of narrative inquiry as my methodological approach and as a means of communication with my participants and a tool for collection of data.

Chapters 4 and 5 presented the stories of the participants. The stories and themes in these chapters reflected the thoughts, perspectives, and life events of the Afghan educational activists and their visions for the future of education. In Chapter 4, stories of four participants were reported holistically in order to set a historical context to the elaboration of other stories. In Chapter 5 voices of all participants of this study were presented under key themes based on their importance and relevance. In Chapter 6 I now draw on the perspectives of the participants to examine the meaning of 'activism', what educational activism entails in Afghanistan, the

contribution that the activists make in this study, and the hopes and desires of the activists for the future of education in Afghanistan.

### **6.3: Activism**

As elaborated in the literature review of this thesis, Fontana (1993), Giroux (1993), and Verma (2010) remind us that educational activism exists to foster the role of schools to promote equality, social justice, and human rights, directly linked to oppression. Freire (1972) presents several reasons why it is the job of the oppressed and the marginalised to challenge and change the way of the oppressor. He argues that for the oppressors to gain and maintain power, they create systems that dehumanise the marginalised. Therefore, the marginalised who fight for their humanity must not dehumanise the oppressors in return. Instead, the oppressed need to work for the humanisation and restoration of humanity of all. Second, Freire maintains that given that the marginalised and the oppressed suffer and fall victim to the agendas of the oppressors, they can better understand and feel the existence of the problems.

Similarly, Sampson and Korn (1970) argue that mere awareness about the structure of operation and how it functions is not enough and that the marginalised through their activism need to be action oriented, organised, and purposeful. Anderson and Herr (2007) also explain how the marginalised need to challenge the beliefs that the privileged have regarding them so they can find their own voices through acts of change for justice and fairness.

The review of selected literature on activism clarified two points. One was that the activists speak out for others, advocate for the rights of the marginalised, and attempt to be the voice of the voiceless or to give the marginalised a voice. They fight against dominant and oppressive ideologies or regimes that dehumanise the oppressed.

The second clarification was that activists are constantly discontented and dissatisfied with the status quo and try to facilitate progressive change. Their discontent and dissatisfaction inspire action for change, which usually involves risk. The literature also suggests that activism can be as large as a continuous battle against an ideology, an oppressive system, or against a dominant and privileged race.

To understand what shapes the identity of an activist, I found the work of Groundwater-Smith and Sachs (2002) profound and relevant. They emphasise that the development of the identity as an activist is deeply rooted in principles of social justice and equity. They argue that “an activist professional is concerned to reduce or eliminate exploitation, inequality and oppression” (p. 352). To promote and maintain democratic discourses and to sustain the activist identity, they suggest that the identity of the activists be located on the pillars of deliberative democracy (p. 352). They elaborate that in a deliberative democracy, professional activists facilitate settings in which citizens regularly come together to reach collective decisions about public issues. They further explain that in a deliberative democracy citizens and officials work together to justify the public policies through reasons that are acceptable to those bound by them. They clarify that the disposition that is based on mutual justifiable reasons, is at the centre of deliberation. Elaborating on democratic principles, they state, “It is negotiated, collaborative, socially critical, future oriented, strategic and tactical” (Groundwater-Smith & Sachs, 2002, p. 353). Meanwhile, they remind us that activism is not an easy task stating;

Activist professionalism is not something that will come naturally. It has to be deeply reflected upon, negotiated, lived and practised. The development of such an identity will be a challenge for many, and will be challenged by others, but once its elements are learned and communicated it will make a significant contribution to the reactivation of trust and all that entails” (p. 353).

It is evident in the narratives of the participants of this study that even in the midst of non-deliberative and totalitarian regimes, activism for similar purposes as a ‘deliberative democracy’ is possible. Although the work of the activist participants of this study occur in a non-deliberative democracy, the perspectives of Baba, Farid, Omid, Hayedah, Saboor, and Sayeed resonate with the explanations of Groundwater-Smith and Sachs (2002) about the work of an activist and the definition of an activist. For example, inequality, oppression, and exploitation are expressed as some of the major reasons for activism of these participants. However, these narratives also indicate that while these activists have similar concerns, they do not have a shared strategy, and are not engaged in a shared single and united fight against oppression. While activist participants of this study are engaged in fighting the status quo, their narratives do not suggest that they are also engaged in creation of an alternative system of education. Lack of such a systematic and collective strategy for generating a more creative and humanised education system has minimised the influence of these activists in fighting against oppression.

Afghan activists of this study help us understand that activism in Afghanistan requires much dedication, awareness, courage and resilience. The main motivation behind their activism is what they wish to achieve in the lives of others in their communities or in their country. It can also be learned from the narratives of these activists that the most effective people to lead change in non-deliberative contexts and under the totalitarian regimes are the locals themselves. These activists show that a substantial amount of context information and knowledge of the community along with social networks is required and necessary for them to survive and to make a difference in education. Their strategy to share their perspectives in social media and to make their words public seem to give them encouragement through the moral support and appreciation

of their fellow Afghans. Such a strategy strengthens their relationship with schools and increases their influence over schools.

As presented in the literature review chapter, Sleeter's (1996) argument that schools could be the site to fight for social change and human emancipation through engagement and participation resonates with the participants' beliefs. Paulo Freire (1972) and John Dewey (1915) similarly highlight how schools can be agents of social change where teachers and students are able to act as social, economic, and political reformers. Kumashiro's (2002) work sheds light on understanding the role of activism in paving the way for the new, clarifying that repetition of practices and policies that discriminate against others is not activism. According to her in an anti-oppressive pedagogy, teachers and students become activists to challenge the status quo to promote equality and respect for the rights of minorities. Kumashiro's (2002) argument helps clarify further that activism exists because oppression exists. Her argument about how the dissatisfaction of minorities can result in the creation of purposeful movements and activism against dominant groups could inspire the Afghan activists to explore more effective approaches to collaborate together for their common purpose.

#### **6.4: Activists' Concerns: Challenges in Afghan Education**

The overarching themes 'dark shadow' and 'constriction' in Chapter 5 present and examine the concerns of the activists in relation to the current situation in education in Afghanistan. Thus the problems and challenges discussed in this section are based on the overarching perspectives, themes and concepts that come out of the narratives of the participants. These perspectives reflect on ideological forces and constrictions of the teachers and students' lives that impact both the learning process and the social, political, and economic status of the teachers. For example, participants' perspectives shed light on how materialism is a major cause

of corruption in the education system, and how political and religious ideologies spread germs of fear and subservience inside classrooms. Concerns of the participants also indicate how constriction of teachers' lives, students' lives, women's lives, and constriction of pedagogy and curriculum negatively impact the social, political, and economic status of the teachers, women, and students.

Selected studies and research articles reviewed for this study reveal that the Afghan education system still encounters significant internal and external problems. The internal problems examined in these studies are corruption, lack of professional teachers, brain drain, domination of extreme religious views, tribal and traditional beliefs, and poor leadership in the MoE. The external problems presented are the unrealistic foreign aid strategies and the negative influence of the neighbouring countries over education in Afghanistan. For example, the study by Borchgrevink (2013) *Transnational links of Afghan Madrasas: Implications for Reform of Religious Education* indicates that the different interpretations of Islam is still a severe issue of conflict in the process of modernising education in Afghanistan. His findings also show that in more recent decades, the Mujahidin and the Taliban used religion for their political and economic interests.

#### **6.4.1: Dark Shadow; Materialism**

Materialism, as a face of the dark shadow and its manifestation in the misuse of aid money, was a major concern of the participants. Participants' narratives reveal that aid money is a major reason for the expansion of a culture of corruption. Their arguments are supported by the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 about the flaws of the aid system and the misuse of aid money in the reconstruction of Afghanistan including her education. Participants' critique of the aid system post Taliban and reflections on the misuse of the billions of dollars in aid create a unique

lens for understanding the insights from some of the beneficiaries of that aid: the teachers. The experiences of the teacher activists about the ‘capacity building’ short-term seminars by the aid agencies, is crucial to understanding what teachers feel about such programmes. Participants’ arguments suggest that most teachers find such workshops of little relevance and importance to their everyday struggles inside classrooms and in their daily lives. Moyo (2009) argues that the voices of the beneficiaries is the most significant factor in the effectiveness of aid, and ignoring their voices results in what she calls ‘Dead Aid’. It is evident in the participants’ narratives that the voices of the local beneficiaries, including teachers, on the aid system have fallen on ‘deaf ears’ and mostly been ignored in the post-Taliban transition.

As another manifestation of materialism, corruption was viewed by the participants as a major contributor to the poor quality of education and passive schooling. The narratives of the participants maintain that education and other structures and infrastructures of the Afghan government are interconnected. Drawing on their varied experiences, the participants suggest that corruption in the education system has roots in the political, religious, economic, and tribal interests of specific groups of people in positions of power in the current government. The examples of the participants about the deployments of the educational authorities based on tribalism and political interest argued for a more transparent government to address such problems. The claims of the participants about the millions of dollars poured into the education system and yet the standard of education remaining low despite this support, may explain the frustration of the participants and even the anger expressed by Sayeed, Baba, and Saboor, about the status quo in education. This indicates the depth of corruption they have perceived in the current government, which is substantiated in NGO reports that Afghanistan has been recognised as one of the most corrupt governments in the world (International, 2014). These activists are

clear in their argument that corruption starts from the top and that some high-ranking officials in education are fundamentally corrupt.

Participants' perspectives illustrate that corruption has also contributed to a lack of engagement of communities and parents with schools and with the education department, because it has caused mistrust in the system and has discouraged people from communicating with the schools.

#### **6.4.1.1: Ideological Challenges: Political and Religious Forces**

Along with materialism, two other faces of the dark shadow that manifest in the narratives of the participants are 'political ideology' and 'religious ideology'. Their perspectives and experiences of the influence of the political and religious ideologies resonate with the concept of oppression in the work of Paulo Freire where those in power oppress the masses by imposing certain beliefs and myths on them (Freire, 1996). Participants' narratives clarify that encouraging children for jihad seemed not to be an accidental but rather an intentional decision by the jihad ideologists. The word jihad is Arabic and a religious term that is interpreted by some as 'holy war' against non-Muslims, while the majority of moderate Muslims interpret it as a virtue for inner cleansing and piety (Tahir, 2012). It is evident both in the literature reviewed and in the narratives of the participants that in Afghan education, the 'holy war' interpretation of jihad was used to encourage war in Afghanistan. While the political ideologies of the oppressive regimes promoted a culture of subservience in children, religious ideology imposed fear on them.

Fear mainly manifested as a product of religious ideology, in the stories of the participants, though it could be argued that political ideology also contributed to the creation of fear as the participants' perspectives on subservience and fear suggest that these phenomena are



highly connected. As a tool of the oppressive forces, fear seems to make children passive recipients and disengages them from active learning. The participants' narratives suggest that fear can result in the disengagement and passivity that serve to support the non-reflective mode of learning that Freire calls 'banking education' (1972). Freire uses this term to critique traditional education, a system where learning is static, critical thinking does not happen, and the job of the teacher is to deposit information in students. The experiences of Sayeed, Farid, and Bahar, suggest that students' silence and passive role inside the classroom may be a result of their fear of being labelled, blamed, or accused, based on the religious belief of a teacher. In other words, these experiences suggest that passive silence is a product of fear and not students' lack of willingness to engage. As well as fear, there seems to be a loss of the practices of engagement both in the students and in the teachers.

Also, the participants' concerns clearly disclose that fear plays a significant negative role in the everyday learning and teaching experiences of students and teachers in Afghan schools. Sayeed's concern that his children were studying in a fearful environment may be the concern of many other Afghan parents who send their children to school. According to Sayeed, any phenomenon that would restrict his daughters' curiosity and limit their freedom to thrive would make education 'poor'. It can be argued that for Sayeed, his children's ability and freedom to ask any questions and to freely discuss any matters, without fear of being accused of a mistake or sin, should be a model of schooling. His story indicates that there may be zero tolerance of religious diversity in the Afghan education system. This indicates that the religious ideologies imposed on schools promotes intolerance in children.

Also, it is evident in Farid's arguments that fear makes students feel inferior. In the work of Paulo Freire (1996), the notions of 'inferiority' and 'superiority' are presented as signs of an

oppressive curriculum where the masses, including teachers and students, feel inferior to the authorities and powerful people who rule them. Farid's belief that in a 'fear-free' environment students and teachers work collaboratively to produce knowledge, is supported by prominent educational theorists such as Paulo Freire and John Dewey. Dewey (1925) explains that learning should be a process of reflecting on experience, and this is similar to Paulo Freire's (1996) advocacy regarding the crucial importance of students' engagement in active learning inside classrooms through continuous dialogue between the teacher and the students, as well as their engagement in a meaning-making process with their teachers.

Congruently, Farid's argument about 'fatalism' and peoples' fear of creating their own fate, also resonates with the work of educationalist Halpin (2003). Halpin states that a destructive enemy to learning in the educational context is fatalism, which he defines as a total determination of events and hopelessness. Farid's point of view also resonates with the argument of Goodman (2008) stating that in a fear-dominated classroom children do not strive for gaining education through exploration, but instead wait for the teacher to insert the information into them so they can prepare for an examination later on. Just as Freire (1972) challenged the 'banking system' education, Goodman notes, "using fear and physical domination to control behaviour is not only primitive, it is psychologically and physically damaging of students (p. 148)." Farid's concerns also resonate with the beliefs of Paulo Freire about fatalism described by Darder (2002) as, "a condition that negates passion and destroys the capacity to dream, making them (citizens) each day more politically vulnerable and less able to face the challenges before them" (p. 38). Hayedah's story shared in Chapter 4 about her primary years as a refugee and being humiliated by a teacher is a vivid example of the negative impact of fear that could stay with a child for a

long time. Psychologists and neurologists note that fear is a misuse of human imagination and human energy (Chandler, 1996).

#### **6.4.2: Constrictions: Teachers' and Women's Lives**

It can be argued based on the perspectives of the participants that teachers' options to play an impactful role in improving the quality of education are limited due to their current social, economic, and political status. Although the participants expect teachers to be more creative, they indicate that the poor conditions are not the result of the teachers' negligence but problems within the system. The participants' stories suggest that despite the poor economic status of the teachers, the community's moral and psychological support for teachers could result in the improvement of the quality of education in schools. However, because of weak governance, corruption, nepotism, and tribalism, such support does not seem to exist. Baba, Farid, and Saboor's narratives about teachers' status in the 'golden times' are very significant. These narratives signal that Afghan people do have the potential and the heritage to treat teachers with more respect so that they could once again gain the social status they deserve. These perspectives indicate that there is a past on which to draw to improve the education system.

It is evident in the narratives of the participants that there is no easy answer to the challenges the teachers face because of the complexities of the issues impacting Afghan education. However, participants' suggestion that "if teachers had better salaries, they would be able to devote the time and energy that they now spend on a second or third job, to enhance the quality of teaching", is of importance and value. Teachers' financial struggles seem to impact other parts of their lives as well as their professions.

Despite the difficulties in the teachers' lives, the stories of Khadij and Hayedah indicate that a small number of teachers do make a difference. Narratives of these participants signal the

hope that a greater engagement of teachers who dare to challenge the status quo could make a greater impact. It can be understood from the arguments of the participants that for them significant improvements in the social and economic status of teachers could improve the quality of education in schools. This resonates with empirical research that shows that countries that rank high in education around the world, have paid special attention to the status of their teachers (Bond, 2015). Although this study presents valuable insights into the understanding of the limitations imposed upon teachers by their poor social and economic status, more detailed considerations of teachers' work lives could be a valuable research topic for future researchers.

It can be learned from the narratives of the participants that constrictions of the lives of teachers and women were also interconnected with the political and religious ideologies of the oppressive regimes that ruled Afghanistan. For example, women's lives were particularly constricted during the Taliban and the Mujahidin era in the 1990s while from the 1950s to the 80s, King Zahir Khan, President Daud Khan, and the pro-communist regimes provided more opportunities for women. The constriction of women's lives, particularly by the Mujahidin after the pro-communist regime, limited opportunities for women, and the process got worse during the Taliban period when the doors of opportunity for women were shut. Closing school doors on women and girls essentially meant severely paralysing Afghan education and therefore the Afghan society as part of the agenda of the Taliban to dehumanise Afghan society. Participants' perspectives remind us that even today in the post-Taliban transition, women continue to face significant challenges, and oppressive ideologies and male-oriented opinions and beliefs constrict women's lives. The participants' insights suggest that restrictions placed on women have direct negative impact on education.

The narrators' stories suggest that even recently little progress has been made in the empowerment of women in Afghan society, and Western aid has not been effective in mediating this situation. Many Afghan schools still follow traditional social norms and beliefs and have done little to change attitudes towards women. The narratives of the female participants, Khadij and Hayedah, about their very limited options in life present a close-up picture of the sorts of injustices against Afghan women. Although female teachers are luckier than most of the jobless women in society, the perspectives of the participants do shed light on the hardship that the female teachers go through in life. Saboor's argument that the aid system slogan of 'women empowerment' is a Western game, is well articulated in the reality of the social life of women where, despite millions of dollars spent on 'women empowerment' projects, many ordinary women live under severe and harsh conditions. Traditional beliefs about women in parts of the country, such as Saboor's example 'women either at home or in the grave', explain why the role of women is colourless, and tragedies continue to happen to women. It is apparent that a passive and neutral education does not give women a voice, and only favours the political and religious forces in power that impose restrictions on women.

The lives of the female activists of this study suggest that if more women had opportunities to challenge the traditional beliefs of the male-oriented mind-sets; the female members of Afghan society could play an integral role for a developed Afghanistan. Activism remains of significant risk to women who do speak out but these narratives suggest that women activists do make a difference through their efforts to provide equitable and empowering education for other women and girls. Yet, it is unclear how the leadership capacity required to mobilise likeminded women, especially teachers, can be developed in such a social environment permeated by fear and highly conservative views towards women.

#### **6.4.1.2: Constrictions: Pedagogy and Students' Learning**

The most significant manifestation of the constriction of pedagogy and curriculum is evident in the stories shared about the dominant pedagogical focus on memorisation and content coverage in schools. Narratives of the participants indicate that one of their major concerns is that all students are taught to think in the same rote way. It is evident in their educational experiences that content coverage and memorisation have been the two most dominant methods in everyday teaching and learning in Afghan schools since the 1980s. The concern of Sayeed, Bahar, Baba, Farid, and Omid about the expectation for children to memorise and to prepare for the examinations shows these children are hardly engaged in creation and construction of knowledge through critical thinking and praxis. According to the participants, the emphasis in schools on content coverage and memorisation makes students consumers of knowledge rather than producers of knowledge and thoughts. The more that content coverage and memorisation as methods of teaching is emphasised, the less space there is for critical thinking, curiosity, and creativity (A. Fisher, 2001). Active learning is directly connected to how creative students are in their learning environment, and content coverage and memorisation do not allow such atmosphere (Tan, 2007).

The narratives also suggest that memorisation leads the students to accept the content taught by a teacher as facts without further discussion. Students do not get a chance to reflect on their lessons learned, nor do they learn to express their thoughts on the content of what they are taught.

Findings of this study suggest that teachers are officially sanctioned to cover the content of the book they teach and have less time to elaborate concepts with the students about what the content might mean in their lives. A key argument of three participants was that memorisation

and content coverage may be another tool of the groups in power to disengage students and teachers from participating in critical thinking and critiquing. As the literature on education clearly shows, content coverage and memorisation do not promote critical thinking. Noddings (2003) argues that oppressive groups could be threatened by critical thinking. She states that “critical thinking is necessary for intelligent tolerance, but it is threatening to many groups” (p. 223). It is clear from their stories that many of these Afghan activists hold similar perspectives.

Participants’ stories also illustrate how students’ learning has been constricted and disrupted due to the decades of war and the influence of oppressive ideologies on the education system. Hayedah and Bahar’s stories and the more academically grounded knowledge of Saboor, provide an insight into how particular ideological perspectives infiltrated the Afghan education system. The curricula that were taught in schools in Afghanistan were first designed for the Afghan refugee camps mostly in Pakistan, but also in Iran, in favour of jihad. Because most of the Mujahidin and the Taliban leaders were ideologists and some were illiterate, they did not reform those curricula after they took power, leading to their implementation into the Afghan education system (Zulfacar, 2006).

### **6.5: Activists’ Inspiration: Hope & Democratic Possibilities**

The extraordinary degree of pain and suffering inflicted upon the Afghan nation in the past five decades of war has been unprecedented. However, this nation has demonstrated extraordinary resilience, patience, and hope for a better future. From an educational perspective, participants of this study illustrate their belief that “there is light at the end of the tunnel” and they desire to move forward under any circumstances. In this section, the discussion presented is based on the participants’ desires and hopes that served as the inspiration for their activism, and their perspectives on the possibilities for a better future for Afghan education.

### 6.5.1: Hope: The Light in the Darkness

Hope, a manifestation of ‘light’ in the midst of ‘the dark shadow’, is evident as a virtue that inspired the participants’ activism for a peaceful and democratic Afghanistan. There is a popular Afghan saying that translates, “there is a path to the top of even the highest mountains”, which illustrates that hope is a strong motivation for the Afghan people. In times of difficulty, Afghans encourage one another not to lose hope. Hope is apparent in the personal and educational experiences of the participants, in their struggles for their children’s education, and their activism for other children in their communities. Hope is mostly reflected in the emotional moments that as a researcher I experienced through the tone, words, and body gestures of the participants. It is evident in their stories that hope is not wishful thinking but a motivation that could lead to some purposeful and collective action towards their common dream. As Halpin (2003) notes, “indeed, to lack hope is to lack a vital spiritual energy and to run the danger of lapsing into lethargy and indifference” (p. 26).

The participant activists’ stories vividly illustrate that they have maintained that vital energy and have not lapsed into the indifference that extinguishes hope. Halpin further notes that because education is essentially future-oriented, in that it aims to bring improvement and growth in the learner’s knowledge and understanding, teachers need to teach with hope in their mind. He argues further that being hopeful is not a passive state, rather:

... it implicitly involves adopting a critical reflective attitude towards prevailing circumstances. Indeed, hope often creates discontent, inasmuch as a person’s hopes for the future may make them very dissatisfied with things as they are presently, especially if they get in the way of making progress (p. 15).

We see in the activists’ stories their dissatisfaction with the current state of education, and thus their ‘hope’ for better education is one of their motivations for their educational activism. Nevertheless, given the extraordinary challenges in Afghan education, the virtue of



hope alone is unlikely to be sufficient to bring about change in and of itself. Even so, these activists through their stories argue for the need to overcome the current challenges of Afghan education with actions imbued with courage and resilience.

Saboor, Baba, and Farid emphasise that hope existed in the past, and their stories and perspectives suggest how hope can be drawn from the past and brought forward to inform the future. Baba and Farid's arguments about what the current education system could learn from the 1960s' reign of King Zahir Khan, and 1970s' government of President Daud Khan, were rooted in their experiences and knowledge of those rulerships. For instance, as teachers were viewed differently in that time and possessed the community's respect, they functioned more responsibly within the education system and were more proactive. These factors resulted in a better quality of education at that time. It is arguable that the education system then had its unique problems and limitations. For example, women in rural areas had no access to education, and traditional and religious discrimination against women (Adamec, 1991) had limited their opportunities. The urban areas were by a significant margin more privileged than rural areas. However, the reason participants refer to those eras as 'golden times' is perhaps because of how damaged the current system of education is compared to that time. The reign of the king and the president created a picture of hope in the minds of these participants that did not just exist in the past but promised a better future for Afghan education.

It is understandable that compared to the challenges that Afghanistan faces today, the progressive educational decades of the king and President Daud could appear as 'golden times'. However, Afghanistan has changed dramatically since then, and geopolitically it faces extreme challenges and demands that might require a different educational system to address current problems.

Nevertheless, Baba's sharing of his own educational experiences during these times could be significantly valuable in reminding the current education policy makers that possibilities and potentials for a better education system exist in that history. Saboor's stories also suggest that if more people with knowledge of this past were enabled to collaborate with education officials they could perhaps make a significant contribution to educational change should the educational authorities have the will for this in the future. And, Farid's argument about the integration of the mystical poems and values into the educational curriculum promises hope that such local knowledge could offer some insights to address the current challenges.

Taken together, their shared hope also reveals the potential for schools and communities to work more closely together as they did in the time of the king. Then perhaps communities might recapture the valuing of, and respect for, teachers that was once present in society, which they see as a necessary foundation for improving education today. All three of these activists' stories of hope suggest the potential and possibilities for improving the quality of education are a part of the history and experience of the Afghan people and need to be brought to the surface from under the heavy layer of 40 years of war.

Hope in the stories of Bibi, Khadij, Hayedah, and Jamilah is manifested in their love and dedication for their school children. They refer to their students as the 'hopes of Afghanistan', which indicates that hope manifests as a light that these participants want to illuminate the path of the future generation towards peace and prosperity. The participants' desire to support their children's education, and to sponsor other children in their communities regardless of the circumstances, demonstrates that their hope is a dedicated and active hope. Their resilience in fighting against the injustices of a highly corrupt system, and determination to challenge the status quo, suggests strong hope for the way forward towards a different education system.

Despite experiences of heartbreak and hardship, the participants seem not to have given up on their dreams and desires for an education system that would promote peace, equality, and an organic democracy.

The engagement of communities with schools is another arena that the participants are hopeful will improve. Findings of this study suggest that one of the impacts of war on education has been that local communities and schools have become distant from each other. From the 1980s onward, the government's control of the education system has contributed to the disengagement of parents from schools. As a result of such disengagement, teachers have little chance to learn about their students' family background and their social status. This lack of knowledge of students' lives outside school, and the lack of a proper communication mechanism between schools and families has added to the poor quality of education.

The participants' narratives also focus on the importance of parents in the education system. They suggest that parents themselves make little attempt to communicate with schools about their children's learning. In their view many parents do not see children's learning and growth as a collaborative effort, but a responsibility of the schools only. Thus instead of collaborating, they complain. Sayeed, Farid, Bahar, and Baba's accounts illustrate that their engagement as parents makes a positive difference, the result of which adds value to everyday learning and teaching of children in their schools. Their support for their children at home, although expressed as a strategy to compensate for what their children are missing at school, is an indication of their understanding of the value of parents' engagement in their children's schooling. These activists' stories suggest that with the help of communities, schools could facilitate social change. By developing a clear strategy and agenda to engage families in schools, they could make a significant impact in reducing the high rates of forced marriages, and address

other social problems. More engagement of parents, such as through the formation of parents' organisations around each school community, could contribute to greater transparency and effectiveness of schools. However, in order for schools to engage with communities, they would require more autonomy and independence from the government to create an open curriculum that would address the needs of their communities.

### **6.5.2: Democratic Possibilities**

The ultimate hope of the participants is for Afghan schools to contribute towards a democratic Afghanistan. Despite all shortcomings, the post-Taliban democratic process has achieved significant gains. Freedom of speech and peoples' access to modern technology such as the internet and cell phones, are two of the most notable achievements of this transition. The concept 'democracy' has affected every aspect of peoples' lives in the country. Farid, Saboor and Omid's perspectives suggest that they view democracy as an umbrella under which all changes have taken place in the post-Taliban era. For example, their belief that warlords have acquired most of the aid money through their private companies is not a criticism of democracy as a concept or governance system but as a post-Taliban phenomenon. Sayed's referral to the common expression that 'you can do anything in a democracy' indicates peoples' misperception of democracy. As Farid, Saboor and Omid argue, because people in Afghanistan are not educated about democracy and know very little about this system, they link it to freedom to do whatever one wants in society without being questioned by law. Their perspectives and concerns suggest that democracy cannot function without the rule of law, as rule of law and democracy are essential complements of one another in a democracy (Magen & Morlino, 2009) .

It can be understood from the arguments of the participants as presented in the previous chapter that people need to be educated first about law and constitution. They express the belief

that people in Afghanistan must learn about the importance of the rule of law and observing the rule of law before they can function in a democratic system. Also, their arguments suggest that the government must be strong enough to implement the rule of law and keep the citizens accountable so that democracy would work in the country. In other words, neither a Western democracy nor a ‘third-world democracy’ would function in Afghan society without the existence and practice of the rule of law.

For the sake of this study, it is crucial to mention that none of these participants is against the international community or democratic values. Their commitment to core democratic values is illustrated in their work, beliefs and stories. They are supporters of the international community but also critiques of the strategy of the international community in their attempts to promote peace and democracy in Afghanistan. Their criticism of democracy is that the Western style of democracy does not work in Afghanistan and that the post-Taliban democratic transition, which has claimed thousands of civilian lives, must be re-examined and problematised. All the experiences of the participants shed light on their reasons for their critiques of the current democratic process.

It can be concluded from the arguments of the participants that democracy is a concept that needs to be problematised significantly, and to be taught in schools as a system that gives a voice to the masses, and promotes virtues of equality and equity in a country. Because of the contested nature of democracy, it is important to trace the roots of this concept in the context of Afghanistan. History shows that the struggle for a democratic and modern Afghanistan has been going on for more than a century (Adamec, 1991). According to Adamec, the first signs of legitimising power (which I view as a semi-democratic process) were demonstrated through the Loya Jirga in 1774. Although the Loya Jirga, or Grand Assembly, has long been a part of the

history of Afghanistan, Ahmad Shah was the first king to be crowned by the chiefs of different tribes in October 1774 (Hanifi, 2004). Loya Jirga was conducted by the chiefs of the tribes to choose the king and to legitimise his monarchy. Although Loya Jirga did not represent a democratic process based on peoples' votes per se, it indicated the will of the Afghan monarchs to respect peoples' representation and the need for legitimacy through the votes of the tribal leaders. Therefore, the concept of Loya Jirga may be the closest to an Afghani way of democracy.

Omid's use of the term "decisiveness" to describe his impression of democracy or Farid's emphasis that 'democracy is not a wild mushroom that can grow overnight' illustrate that Afghanistan needs time to become a fully functioning democracy, which is possible through education and raising awareness in the population.

In sum, the hope for Afghan education to contribute towards a democratic Afghanistan is evident in all the participants' accounts, though their critiques illustrate the misuse of the democratic process by the authorities and those with influence and power in the post-Taliban period. Their arguments that democracy is a product of a democratic thought process and not merely wearing a 'neck-tie' or wearing the mask of democracy, illustrates why these participants believe a different democracy may be needed for Afghanistan and why education is at the core of teaching democratic values. As John Dewey (1921) says, "a democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience (p. 87).

## **6.6: Afghan Philosophy and Western Pedagogy**

It is evident in the stories of the participants that there is a past in Afghanistan on which they draw to suggest solutions for the future of Afghan education. For example, Baba, Farid, and

Saboor emphasise the need to learn from the governments of President Daud and King Zahir in order to reform education. Similarly, Farid's insistence that the mystical poets such as Rumi offer significant insights for education is another example of how the past can provide light for the future. The participants draw on meaningful Afghan philosophical traditions, as reflected most strongly with Rumi. Therefore, I examined a selection of poems from Rumi as an antecedent of modern Afghan thought. Using this local lens could be thought of as seeking an 'indigenous Afghan worldview' in critically considering the themes from these activists' stories. Rumi's philosophy provides an insight to what such mystical philosophers offer to address the current issues and challenges in Afghan education. Rumi, however, does not directly discuss pedagogy, curriculum or any theories of education in his work. As an Afghan philosopher, his views throw light on the pattern of educational values in the narratives. Therefore, to deal directly with the practice of schooling, curriculum, and pedagogy, I draw on Western philosophers who come from a similar value base to Rumi. The lesson learned from Rumi's philosophy is that, besides maths, science, and language, schools must teach children values such as kindness, tolerance, acceptance, empathy, and love. Regardless of the kind of virtues that Rumi presents, every virtue is one way or another connected to love. It is love that ties people together. Love in Rumi's poems is manifested in the form of sincerity, genuineness, confidence, endurance, perseverance for good reason, gentleness, courage, loyalty, self-worth, self-esteem, respect, openness, concern for others, tolerance, self-criticism, and care.

#### **6.6.1 Rumi: Virtues of Consciousness, Empathy, and Tolerance**

Although other participants reminded me during the interviews that the local knowledge they considered indigenous is important in addressing the current challenges and issues of Afghan education, Farid's perspectives suggest that incorporation of the knowledge and

philosophies of the Afghan mystical poets is essential. Farid's view clarifies two important points. One is that it is vital that any attempt to reform Afghan education must have roots in Afghan society and not be seen as foreign, a claim supported by the history of Afghanistan. The second point is that given the influence of religious fundamentalism and tribalism over education, the current education system has failed to promote values such as compassion, tolerance, and care in children. Mystical knowledge such as that of Rumi is replete with such values. As an Afghan educator, I would argue that for schools to become agents of social change and promote peace, equality, and social justice, the incorporation of mystical knowledge and specially Rumi's philosophies and teachings is essential.

Rumi's influence in Afghan cultural practices is occidental and philosophical. His work, as presented in this thesis, is centred on spiritual awakening and inner realisation. As a mystic, Rumi tries to enlighten his audience by touching their souls. His belief is that through unity of existence (*vahdat-e-vojud*), people can know themselves and become more tolerant and accepting of a diversity of beliefs and thoughts. In other words, he explains that the more a person becomes united with his or her own spirit and soul, the more readily he or she acknowledges the common soul and spirit humans of all kinds share. To realise oneself, Rumi insists on individuals gaining education. In several of his poems it is evident that learning is a process of humanisation where humankind learns about the importance of putting good virtues and values into practice. In the process of learning, according to Rumi, maturity and consciousness must grow in individuals. He finds ignorance and the conflicts it creates a matter of immaturity. As elaborated in Chapter 2, according to him, evil exists in man's mind due to ignorance, and the cure for ignorance is in education. Another lens of Rumi that brings us closer to the concept of activism is his perspective on innovation, renewing, and creativity, illustrated in



various poems in which he places emphasis on education and knowledge to enable children to become more innovative and creative human beings and to try new things. Moahed (2003) draws on Rumi and quotes him:

“Say something fresh and new so you can renew and refresh both worlds. And as you try the new, make it go beyond the two worlds and make it eternal. The time of the old sellers and old goods is gone. We are the new sellers and this world is our market” (p. 121).

He clarifies that to create the new, one must penetrate the old, which requires risk and sacrifices. This resonates with the qualities that make one an activist. Rumi is against repetition, and to him learning is a momentum that continually creates the new and challenges ‘the market of the old sellers’.

In the paragraphs below, I present Rumi’s perspectives on three virtues that the educational activists consider highly important and try to promote through their educational activism. These virtues are consciousness, empathy, and tolerance.

#### **6.6.1.1.: Consciousness**

Rumi sums up his life journey in three words saying, I was raw, I became mature, I was burned (Whinfield & Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, 1973). He also describes human formation and development as a similar process where humans are raw before they gain knowledge, knowledge makes them mature, and if they fully embrace love, they reach their highest humanity thus ‘burn’ in love.

Rumi’s philosophy reveals that consciousness results in the purity of the soul. The more conscious a person is, the more aware he or she becomes of the presence of his soul essence and spirit. Therefore, the product of consciousness is spiritual awakening. An insight that Rumi’s philosophy offers a way to address the concerns of the activists about their children becoming ‘informed’ is that true reform begins from within, and the job of education is to awaken that

awareness in children and youth by reminding them of their inner potential. In Rumi's view it is discovering the 'hidden treasures within' so that children become more fully aware of their own essence and spirit. Therefore to Rumi, education is a necessity for consciousness 'a process of maturity' for the purpose of purification of the soul (*tazkiya-al-nafs*). However, he reminds us that education needs to address both the intellect (*aql*) and the heart (*qalb*) in the process of humanisation of the self and others.

For Afghan schools to apply Rumi's philosophy of consciousness, education needs to become a process of bringing up learners as spiritual beings where they start to develop strong faith in their own humanity and in the humanity of their fellow-humans; concepts that, according to the narratives of the participants, are not common in Afghan schools. Spiritual upbringing develops humans' attention, memory, reasoning, and harmony (Whinfield & Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, 1973). Rumi's philosophy suggests that the outcomes of spiritual upbringing are the virtues of health, aliveness, faith, courage, patience, determination, and trust, which are elaborated in many of Rumi's tales in *Mathnavi*. Rumi's concept of consciousness offers significant insights that educational activists could include in their discussions with schools on how to create a more informed generation of students through the use of local and what they term 'indigenous' lenses.

#### **6.6.1.2: Empathy**

To address the participants' concern about 'intolerance' in the Afghan education system, Rumi's discourses on empathy offer valuable insights. Empathy as the capacity to understand another person's emotions, feelings, and state of mind; and to accept and appreciate them (Cooper, 2011), manifests in several poems in Rumi's masterwork *Mathnavi*. The process of understanding others empathically evokes non-judgemental views towards them (Scapaletti, 2011). In other words, a caring and respectful understanding of what others are experiencing is

empathy. To Rumi, empathy is learning to live together in harmony and peace. His writings illustrate that harmony can be experienced through mutual respect, mutual understanding and trust, collaboration, concern for good, equality, and integrity. Empathy (yakdeli, or hamdeli) creates tolerance and social responsibility. Rumi's teachings of virtues such as empathy and tolerance are rooted in the process of development of inner peace in the minds and hearts of individuals. Rumi reminds us that everyone is given the ability to express themselves in their own ways. In learning process, teachings about empathy enable learners to conceptualise a world beyond the world of themselves so they can develop multiple and divergent perspectives. Empathy is when learners can examine their own perspectives as well as listen to the perspectives of others through their souls. Rumi's perspectives on yakdeli empathy resonate with the activist participants' vision of promoting this virtue as a core and essential concept in Afghan education to create a more caring nation.

#### **6.6.1.3: Tolerance**

The views of the participants of this study demonstrate that 'radicalised interpretations of Islam' have harmed the education system in the past few decades. They illustrate that the domination of religious ideologies over education created a subservient schooling culture surrounded by fear. Such radicalised interpretations have existed in Afghanistan for centuries. Rumi's mysticism inspired his attempts to moderate hard-line interpretations of Islam, and in most of his poems, tolerance specifically relates to religious tolerance. Tolerating a variety of religious beliefs was not only acceptable to Rumi, he also encouraged others to learn about a variety of religious teachings (Nicholson, 1950). Rumi viewed religious diversity as an outcome of the divine design. According to him, what made some prophets close to God was their patience with those who opposed and rejected them. Rumi believed in brotherhood, generosity,

and friendliness between people and nations. It was not surprising that many Christians and Jews participated in his burial. Rumi was a figure loved by adherents of many religions. His greatest teaching in stories such as Moses and the Shepherd is that freedom of inquiry and interpretation should be encouraged. As indicated in the stories of the participants of this study, one of their main concerns is that their children do not enjoy such freedom; to freely inquire, and freely interpret. For Rumi the only limitation to tolerance is violence. Anyone harming another must be punished by law. Rumi's arguments in support of tolerance are primarily made on moral grounds and how people treat one another.

### **6.7: Friere; Toward a Humanising Pedagogy**

The philosophy of Paulo Freire (1996) on how oppressive forces 'dehumanise' children through the imposition of passive methods of teaching and learning and disconnection of communities from schools, help unpack the participants' perspectives on the existence of oppressive forces. According to Freire, education cannot be isolated from the links between culture, philosophy, society, economy, religion, and politics in a community (Freire, 1996). He argues that the education provided in schools has a direct relation to what the dominant politics and the rulers want the people to know. Freirean perspectives suggest that individuals interested in education must have a good understanding of how the oppressive force and dominant culture function within education and how it excludes or includes different social classes. Freire regards critical engagement and critical thinking as significant in the process of transforming the world through education. Freire opposes the use of education as a way to dominate others. He considers education as a political act expressing a political will and usually the will of what he refers to as 'the elites' (Freire, 1994). When the will of the elites, in the case of Afghanistan the warlords and tribal, political, and religious leaders, is imposed on the public, oppression and domination

become prevalent in the classroom. He reminds us that a teacher's role is one of domination when the teacher is regarded as the only source of information and the students blindly accept the teacher's worldview and interpretations of the subject matter they are taught. In other words, when critical dialogue is missing inside a classroom, as it appears is the case in Afghanistan, the teacher might (perhaps unintentionally) impose the wants and will of the dominators on students regardless of whether what is taught is relevant to the students' lives. Freire's argument suggests that the way education is defined by the elite is restrictive.

He reasons that under the elite's domination, school is a mechanism of domination and cultural invasion (Freire, 1985). His notion of the 'oppressive forces' in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1996), resonates with the description of the participants about how political and religious ideologies imposed on schools oppress students and teachers. I argue that participants of this study are engaged in promoting what Freire refers to as awareness of the masses about the mechanism of politics, cultural awareness, and economical determination (Freire, 1994).

Freire explains that the awareness of the masses largely depends on the role of the intellectuals, including the teachers, as mediators between the state and the public. It is evident in the participants' narratives that there is some resemblance between Freire's view of 'intellectuals' and the qualities that these activist participants demonstrate. His philosophy suggests that schools as a significant part of a larger community have a responsibility to raise the awareness of the masses. Freire challenges the ideological conditions that exist in the education system for the purpose of maintaining and reproducing the capitalist system, and the creation of a labour force that would passively comply with the dictates of the dominant powers and institutions (Freire, 1996). It might be helpful that the educational activists and perhaps the Afghan education policy makers consider Freire's reminder that the oppressive forces may

intentionally design educational curriculums to keep students and teachers passive and to preserve the status quo.

It can be learned from Freire's arguments that without the knowledge and understanding of contemporary pedagogical theories, concepts, and methods, mere knowledge about the influence of powers over education would not lead to change. Therefore, knowledge of the educational theories on active engagement, participatory teaching and learning inside classrooms, and divergent thinking offer significant value in a process of liberating education in Afghanistan from the dominating forces that influence it. The knowledge that comes from such theories is concerned with the awareness of the masses about their potential and their roles in the making of history (Gadotti, 1996) and transforming the world (Freire, 1972).

It could be concluded from Freire's arguments that because the oppressors use force to maintain and gain power, force is required to resist them. However, Freire emphasises that the force of the oppressed must not be identical to the force of the oppressors, meaning that the oppressed must not try to oppress the oppressors. According to Freire, oppression is a process of dehumanisation (Freire, 1972) thus the force of the oppressed must be rooted in love, compassion, and justice for all; the oppressor and the oppressed must work towards a more humanised world for all.

## **6.8: Final Thoughts**

Besides the localised nature of the voices presented in this study, the dynamics among the participants add to the richness of the data. The participants include teacher activists, public intellectuals, and parent activists. While they critique the status quo, their narratives reveal their constant engagement in trying to raise awareness about the need for reforms in Afghan education. The stories of these participants suggest that the most important motivation for their

activism is the development of critical awareness of their life experiences. In other words, their ‘whys’ are the most important drive for their activism. Activism is ingrained in risk (Anderson & Herr, 2007) and unless individuals have strong reasons, their activism cannot be sustained. These narrators seem to possess a common strong reason for their activism which is for education to promote a peaceful, developed and stable Afghanistan for the future generations.

Another important factor that contributes to the richness of the data is that these participants, whether teacher activists or public intellectuals and parents, are aware of the everyday teaching and learning in schools. Five of the participants have their own children going to schools in Herat. While three of them, Baba, Bahar, and Sayeed, give examples of their children’s education in their stories, the other two, Jamila and Farid, indirectly reflect on their children’s education. This is a crucial component of the study as it makes the perspectives of these participants more relevant and realistic to the everyday teaching and learning. They all have very close relations with education and are familiar with everyday teaching and learning in Afghan schools either through their own engagement or through their children’s education.

Reflection is a key component in the stories of these activists. They not only share their memories and experiences of education but also reflect on them, which explains how they make sense of their experiences and give meaning to the events in their lives. In fact, it is not the experiences and events that inspire their activism but their reflection on those experiences and how they translate and interpret those experiences. For example, while Baba describes how he was mistreated by the Taliban at school and that he knew schools taught very little of use to children, he explains that he kept sending his children to school because he believed that a proper response to the oppression of the Taliban was to resist. Similarly, Bahar and Hayedah’s responses to the discrimination against them as refugees, was to work harder, read more, and

prove themselves talented and worthy. Therefore, more than the experience, what makes the stories of these participants invaluable is their reflection and response to the events in their lives. Thus activism is not a product of the events in their lives but a result of the meaning they give to those events and experiences. As John Dewey reminds us, we do not learn from experience but we learn from reflecting on the experience (Dewey, 1938).

The resemblance and overlaps in the stories and experiences of the educational activists, illustrate how different oppressive regimes since the 1980s used education as a means to maintain and gain power. The examination of the narratives indicates that the dominating political, tribal, social, foreign, and religious forces made a significant negative impact on education in the country. The findings suggest that despite the significant financial support of international donors, and Afghans' passion for education, the quality of education remains poor and schools contribute little to the process of peace, democracy, and development.

The issues with Afghan education are complex. Participants' narratives suggest that there is no easy answer to the challenges facing Afghan education. For example, participants' suggested solution about the increase in the salaries of teachers, though important, is a simplistic answer to the poverty teachers are facing. Many factors including misuse of aid money, the attitude of society to teachers, corruption, and poor governance, all play their role in the parlous state of the teaching profession. Decades of war, imposition of oppressive ideologies, misuse of aid and corruption, and the loss of the country's intellectual property, have left Afghanistan with broken educational infrastructures and a low standard of education. The evidence of how political, tribal, foreign, and religious powers influence education in Afghanistan, supported by the participants' examples of everyday learning and teaching inside schools, reveal the significant challenges Afghan education faces today. The voice of the Afghan educational



activists (the research participants) contributes to the awareness of the issues. The problem with the current system is that it is designed, conceived, and structured for the purpose of supporting the ideologies of the powerful authorities. In other words, the perspectives and experiences of the participants suggest that the current education system is designed to serve the interests of the ideologists. The examples of Sayeed, Bahar, Bahar, Farid, and Baba clarify that their desire is for their children to see a purpose in going to school and be motivated to go to school, which they illustrate in their narratives is not the case for many children. The current dominant reason behind schooling is to prepare children to enter higher education, and the system is extremely focused on the limited academic ability that it gives to the children.

Social and cultural transformation on a grand scale, however, is not an easy path. As described throughout the thesis, religious and political oppression is part of Afghanistan's traditions. The stories of the activists reveal that crucial challenges remain that need to be addressed. For example, the education system's intolerance of diversity of beliefs and thoughts indicates that, whereas around the world countries are becoming more diverse, it may be impossible for a child of a faith different from Islam to survive in an Afghan school. In a changing world where Jew and Hindu, Muslim and Christian work together under same the roof, Afghanistan cannot survive in isolation. Therefore, the Afghan nation desperately needs an education system that promotes values of tolerance and respect in children.

In sum, my thesis suggests that the roots of the problem with Afghan education are historic, and that the socio-political and religious attitudes that restrict education are deeply and widely embedded in the religious and political ideologies that hold sway in the country. Other factors are people's traditional beliefs as well as the constant foreign interventions in Afghanistan affairs. Findings suggest that the participants' desire is for the promotion of

divergent and creative thinking where students see possibilities and can relate everyday learning to their real lives. It can be generalised from the perspectives of all participants that their call for the reform of education is ultimately for Afghan schools to enable children to gradually shape their own lives and become productive citizens who contribute towards a stable, developed and democratic Afghanistan.

Examination and analysis of the ways the oppressive forces operate in education and the resistance of the Afghan educational activists presented in this thesis suggest that there is a need for more collective, disciplined, and purposeful resistance against the status quo. Greater participation of parents, civil service unions, and public intellectuals through purposeful and continued dialogue, will help the Afghan nation make better progress in improving the quality of education and empowering schools to play a significant role in creating a stable Afghanistan that would enjoy peace, social justice, the rule of law, humanity, and democracy.

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## **Appendices:**

### **Ethical Approval**

#### **Consent forms for Educational Activists**

#### **Consent forms for Teacher Activists**

#### **Information Sheets for Educational Activists**

#### **Information Sheets for Teacher Activists**

## Ethical Approval



### HUMAN ETHICS COMMITTEE

Secretary, Lynda Griffioen  
Email: [human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz)

Ref: 2013/08/ERHEC

5 April 2013

Mohammad Tariq Habibyar  
College of Education  
UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY

Dear Tariq

Thank you for providing the revised documents in support of your application to the Educational Research Human Ethics Committee. I am very pleased to inform you that your research proposal "Hegemonic processes and forces influencing education in Afghanistan and methods of deconstructing these hegemonies" has been granted ethical approval.

Please note that this approval is subject to the incorporation of the amendments you have provided in your email of 13 March 2013.

Should circumstances relevant to this current application change you are required to reapply for ethical approval.

If you have any questions regarding this approval, please let me know.

We wish you well for your research.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'N Surtees'.

Nicola Surtees  
**Chair**  
**Educational Research Human Ethics Committee**

*"Please note that Ethical Approval and/or Clearance relates only to the ethical elements of the relationship between the researcher, research participants and other stakeholders. The granting of approval or clearance by the Ethical Clearance Committee should not be interpreted as comment on the methodology, legality, value or any other matters relating to this research."*

## Consent form for Educational Activists



Tariq Habibyar

[tariq.habibyar@pg.canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:tariq.habibyar@pg.canterbury.ac.nz)

4<sup>th</sup> of February 2013

### Consent Form for Educational Activists

- I have been given a full explanation of this project and have been given an opportunity to ask questions.
- I understand what will be required of me if I agree to take part in this project.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any stage without penalty.
- I understand that any information or opinions I provide will be kept confidential to the researcher and that any published or reported results will not identify me.
- I understand that all data collected for this study will be kept in locked and secure facilities at the University of Canterbury and will be destroyed after five years.
- I understand that I will receive a report on the findings of this study. I have provided my email details below for this.
- I understand that if I require further information I can contact the researcher, Tariq Habibyar. If I have any complaints, I can contact [ ] or the Chair of the University of Canterbury Educational Research Human Ethics Committee.

By signing below, I agree to participate in this research project.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

Please return this completed consent form to [Tariq Habibyar] in the envelope provided by

[Day/Month]

## **Consent forms for Teacher Activists**

### **Consent Form for Teacher Activists**

- I have been given a full explanation of this project and have been given an opportunity to ask questions.
- I understand what will be required of me if I agree to take part in this project.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any stage without penalty.
- I understand that any information or opinions I provide will be kept confidential to the researcher and that any published or reported results will not identify me.
- I understand that all data collected for this study will be kept in locked and secure facilities at the University of Canterbury and will be destroyed after five years.
- I understand that I will receive a report on the findings of this study. I have provided my email details below for this.
- I understand that if I require further information I can contact the researcher, Tariq Habibyar. If I have any complaints, I can contact [ ] or the Chair of the University of Canterbury Educational Research Human Ethics Committee.

By signing below, I agree to participate in this research project.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

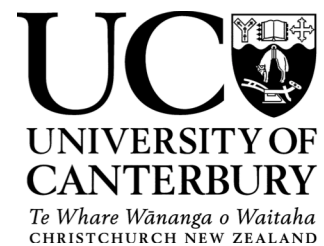
Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

Please return this completed consent form to [Tariq Habibyar] in the envelope provided by [Day/Month].

### Information Sheet for Educational Activists

Tariq Habibyar

[tariq.habibyar@pg.canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:tariq.habibyar@pg.canterbury.ac.nz)



Date:

### *Information Letter for Educational Activists*

I am a PhD candidate at the University of Canterbury. To fulfil the requirement of my PhD degree, I am conducting this research project related to education in Afghanistan. I work under the supervision of Professor Letitia Fickel and Professor Janinka Greenwood. Professor Letitia can be reached at +64 3 345 8460 and [letitia.fickel@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:letitia.fickel@canterbury.ac.nz) and professor Janinka can be reached at +64 3 345 8390 and [janinka.greenwood@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:janinka.greenwood@canterbury.ac.nz).



I was a lecturer at Herat University in Herat Afghanistan, where I conducted a few educational research projects from 2009 to 2012. The results of my work helped several teachers in their specific educational areas to which I am indebted to my participants. I am currently interested in exploring the thoughts and perspectives of teacher activists about the hegemonic forces that influence education in Afghanistan. If necessary, I am happy to explain the specifics of my study in more details prior to the interview.

I'd like to invite you to participate in my present study. If you agree to take part, you will be requested to do the following:

- Complete a questionnaire that is about your current job and a few demographical questions.
- Share your stories about your education background and what inspired you to initiate activism?
- Your vision for education in Afghanistan/what you like to see education looks like in 5 years from now and why?
- Your opinion on what significant hegemonic forces influence education in Afghanistan and how existence of such hegemonies inhibits your participation in moving towards your vision?
- Your overall impression of the current education system in Afghanistan and your deepest concern about the status quo of education in relation to the hegemonic forces?
- Explain what you mean by activism, what it involves and in what ways do you contribute to education in Afghanistan?
- At the end what are your overall suggestions for the reform of education in Afghanistan?

Your participation would involve a two hours interview. Please note that participation in this study is voluntary. If you do participate, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you withdraw, I will do my best to remove any information relating to you, provided this is practically achievable.

To protect your privacy, I will take particular care to ensure the confidentiality of all data gathered for this study. I will also take care to ensure your anonymity in publications of the findings. Before I use the data from this study, you will receive a copy of the interview notes and once I have your permission and satisfaction, will I use it in the next stages of my study. All the data will be securely stored in password protected facilities and locked storage at the University of Canterbury for five years following the study. It will then be destroyed.

The results of this research may be used to increase teachers' awareness about the role of activism in promoting social justice, equality, and democracy. The study aims to suggest ways that schools in Afghanistan could minimize the influence of hegemonic forces in everyday learning and teaching. This research further anticipates increasing the positive and significant role that schools could play in the communities they function through the deconstruction of the various hegemonies. The results will also be reported internationally at conferences and international journals. All participants will receive a report on the study. If you have any questions about the study, please contact me (details above). If you have complaint about the study, you may contact either Professor Letitia, my supervisor, or the Chair, Educational Research Human Ethics Committee, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch ([human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz)).

If you agree to participate in this study, please complete the attached consent form and return it to me in the envelope provided by [Day/Month].

I look forward to working with you and thank you in advance for your contributions.

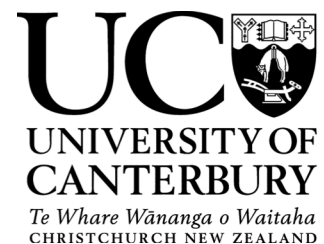
Sincerely, Tariq Habibyar

### Information Letter for Teacher Activists

Tariq Habibyar

[tariq.habibyar@pg.canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:tariq.habibyar@pg.canterbury.ac.nz)

Date:



### *Information Letter for Teacher Activists*

I am a PhD candidate at the University of Canterbury. To fulfil the requirement of my PhD degree, I am conducting this research project related to hegemony and education in Afghanistan. I work under the supervision of Professor Letitia Fickel and Professor Janinka Greenwood. Professor Letitia can be reached at +64 3 345 8460 and [letitia.fickel@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:letitia.fickel@canterbury.ac.nz) and professor Janinka can be reached at +64 3 345 8390 and [janinka.greenwood@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:janinka.greenwood@canterbury.ac.nz).

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- Your opinion on what significant hegemonic forces influence education in Afghanistan and how existence of such hegemonies inhibits your participation in moving towards your vision?
- Your overall impression of the current education system in Afghanistan and your deepest concern about the status quo of education in relation to the hegemonic forces?
- Explain what you mean by activism, what it involves and how it makes your job different from none-activist teachers?
- At the end what are your overall suggestions for the reform of education in Afghanistan?

Your participation would involve a two hours interview. Please note that participation in this study is voluntary. If you do participate, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any

time without penalty. If you withdraw, I will do my best to remove any information relating to you, provided this is practically achievable.

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If you agree to participate in this study, please complete the attached consent form and return it to

me in the envelope provided by [Day/Month].

I look forward to working with you and thank you in advance for your contributions.

Sincerely, Tariq Habibyar